HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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§ Members of the Government listed under more than one Department
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3 May 2016
House of Commons

Tuesday 3 May 2016

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

CITY OF LONDON CORPORATION (OPEN SPACES) BILL

Ordered,

That the Promoters of the City of London Corporation (Open Spaces) Bill, which was originally introduced in this House in this Session on 22 January 2016, should have leave to suspend any further proceedings on the Bill in order to proceed with it, if they think fit, in the next Session of Parliament according to the provisions of Standing Order 188A (Suspension of Bills).—(The Chairman of Ways and Means.)

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Broadband

1. Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of availability of broadband to businesses in Yorkshire and the Humber. [904763]

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade (Sajid Javid): I recently announced a joint review by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport of business broadband to ensure that businesses are able to access the affordable, high-speed broadband that they need and deserve. More than 250,000 homes and businesses in Yorkshire and the Humber, and more than 100,000 in the north-east, have superfast broadband available for the first time thanks to the Government’s investment programme.

Paula Sherriff: I thank the Secretary of State for his response. If the Department is on track to meet its targets, why does Ofcom analysis predict that by 2017, when 95% of all UK premises will have superfast broadband, around 18% of small and medium-sized enterprises, including many in my constituency, will not? Why are so many businesses being left behind, and does the Secretary of State accept that his plans show a lack of ambition?

Sajid Javid: No, I do not. I hope that the hon. Lady will recognise that superfast broadband coverage throughout the UK has increased from 45% of the country in 2010 to almost 90% now, and that we are fully on target to reach 95% by 2017. It is important that we keep looking at new ways to extend coverage through fixed wireless and mobile, and that is exactly what we are doing.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of availability of broadband to businesses in the north-east. [904765]

Sajid Javid: No, I do not. I hope that the hon. Lady will recognise that superfast broadband coverage throughout the UK has increased from 45% of the country in 2010 to almost 90% now, and that we are fully on target to reach 95% by 2017. It is important that we keep looking at new ways to extend coverage through fixed wireless and mobile, and that is exactly what we are doing.

Julie Elliott: A senior adviser at the Institute of Directors has said that they expect the Government to meet the universal service obligation, but that is only because the bar is set so low. How are the Government going to provide the physical infrastructure to maintain Britain’s position at the forefront of digital innovation in business? Will the Secretary of State also answer the question about the lack of provision for SMEs, which he did not address?
Sajid Javid: We are extending broadband coverage throughout the country and it includes hundreds of thousands of SMEs, including in the hon. Lady’s constituency. We are on target, and she may like to know that our USO is twice as high as is recommended in the EU. Already, despite the fact that there is more work to do—I am the first to accept that—we have wider coverage than most of our large EU partners, we have higher average speeds and we have the lowest average price.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The Ofcom solution to the desperately poor penetration of fibre to premises in the UK is to open up access to BT’s ducts and poles, but that would require reasonable rates of access as well as a clear network map of those ducts and poles. What can the Secretary of State do to make sure that BT complies with those requirements?

Sajid Javid: I have read Ofcom’s report carefully and met Ofcom a number of times about that issue, and I have every reason to think that BT will comply. If that does not happen, of course we will look at what action we can take.

Regional Growth

2. James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): What recent steps has he taken to (a) promote regional growth and (b) create a midlands engine.

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade (Sajid Javid): We are absolutely committed to regional growth. We recently launched a further round of growth deals, and the March Budget highlighted the Government’s support for the midlands engine. It includes a £250 million midlands engine investment fund, new enterprise zones, and a devolution deal for Greater Lincolnshire worth £450 million.

James Morris: One of the keys to growth in the black country part of the west midlands, which I represent, is greater collaboration between business and further education colleges. Halesowen College and Sandwell College both excellently serve my constituency. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet the principals of Halesowen and Sandwell Colleges to talk more about how to reduce the skills gap in the black country, to promote further growth in the region?

Sajid Javid: I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend. One of the reasons we have seen a 50% fall in his constituency is that he has been promoting just that type of collaboration. I enjoyed visiting Halesowen College with him last year to learn about the advanced science, engineering and technology centre, and of course I will be more than happy to meet him and college representatives.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State join me and other Leicestershire MPs as well as many throughout the world in congratulating Leicester City football club on winning the premier league yesterday? Does he agree that this will boost jobs not just in Leicester but in the midlands region, and not just for those interested in football but for those in tourism? Does he accept that rather than Red Leicester, it is actually Blue Leicester?

Sajid Javid: I like the sound of Blue Leicester—I like it very much—but let me congratulate the right hon. Gentleman and, most of all, his constituents on their stunning victory last night, which I think the whole nation is celebrating. I suggest he make the most of it while he can.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Regional growth and the midlands engine are reliant on businesses such as those in Cannock Chase that are investing and exporting. I visited a business in Cannock on Friday that is looking to grow, but faces difficulty in getting access to finance from the bank it has banked with for years, and this has resulted in its switching banks. Will my right hon. Friend outline what measures the Government have taken to improve access to finance for small and medium-sized businesses?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. I will highlight two things. First, there is the local growth fund: almost £8 billion has already been allocated and the Chancellor talked in the last Budget of a further £4 billion by the end of this Parliament. There is also the launch of the midlands engine investment fund: hundreds of millions of pounds will be allocated to small businesses, including those in Cannock Chase.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): But if we are to get all these visitors to Leicester, Nottingham, Derby and across the east and the west midlands and we are to get the midlands engine moving, will the Secretary of State talk to his colleagues about infrastructure investment more generally, because we are certainly losing out in the east midlands, with only £37 per head of rail investment compared with £294 per head in London?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman raises the important issue of infrastructure investment. It is because we have a strong economy that, under this Government, we have a programme of £300 billion of investment over the next few years. That of course includes the midlands, with the investment in the main line and in HS2. However, there is always more we can do, and I am very happy to hear new ideas.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to praise the work of the local enterprise partnerships in promoting the economy of the west midlands, particularly the Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP, of which Lichfield is a member? Will my right hon. Friend clarify, however, what will be the role of the LEPs and what will be the role of the midlands engine, which is about to appoint or has appointed a new chairman, in helping to promote the regional economy?

Sajid Javid: I join my hon. Friend. Friend in commending the work of LEPs throughout the UK, but especially that of the Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP, not least because it covers my constituency. I have seen the work that it has achieved, particularly under its chairman, Andy Street, and it is very commendable. The LEPs will
work with local authorities throughout the midlands to really fire up the midlands engine, which means co-operation on things such as infrastructure, trade and skills.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): A couple of weeks ago, I asked the Prime Minister about the possible closure of the British Gas Oldbury site, with the loss of 700 jobs. In his reply, the Prime Minister assured me:

“We will make sure that a ministerial taskforce is available to talk to the company and the local community and to provide assistance in terms of retraining and other things.”—[Official Report, 20 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 917.]

Imagine my disappointment on being told that there will be no ministerial taskforce, but that Ministers will have regular contact with a taskforce to be set up by the local authority. I do not think that that matches up to the assurance from the Prime Minister. There needs to be a real drive to keep or to replace these jobs, so when is BIS going to deliver on the Prime Minister’s assurance?

Sajid Javid: Job losses, whenever they are announced, are regrettable, as they of course are in this case, which is why we must do everything we can. I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that soon after the Prime Minister said that, the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise and the Minister for Employment had a meeting with a managing director from British Gas. I understand that the redundancies are not final yet—the consultation period is still going on—so let us hope that they are not as bad as those that have been seen. We will continue to do whatever we can, and that includes contact with the company.

Adult Skills Provision

4. Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): What is his Department’s strategy is for the funding of adult skills provision in FE colleges for the remainder of this Parliament; and if he will make a statement.

The Minister for Skills (Nick Boles): We are protecting the adult education budget in cash terms, extending subsidised loans to advanced learners and introducing an apprenticeship levy, so funding will be 40% higher in cash terms by 2020.

Colleen Fletcher: We are told that the adult skills budgets will be devolved to regions that have secured a devolution deal. Will the Minister assure me that those budgets will be ring-fenced and not subjected to cuts?

Nick Boles: We will certainly be ensuring that the budgets are spent on skills training, but the whole point of devolving them is to give the local combined authorities the power to decide which are the skills priorities in their area, not to have them asking me for permission to spend on a skills need that they have identified.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Area reviews are an important way of understanding local adult education needs. Will the Minister be encouraging such reviews to look at the needs of women returning to work after caring responsibilities, so that they can use the further education sector to really develop their skills and add to the productivity of our country?

Nick Boles: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the great opportunities in the apprenticeships programme is that apprenticeships are all age. For women who have perhaps taken a career break, or just want to change their profession, an apprenticeship is an opportunity to gain new skills while also earning an income so that they can forge a great career.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): When will the Government be publishing guidelines on how skills budgets might be devolved in those areas where that devolution is being looked at?

Nick Boles: That will depend on when exactly the devolution deal is done. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, in our own area of Greater Lincolnshire that deal is reasonably well advanced; in other parts of the country, the deals are less well advanced. Fundamentally, it is pretty simple: we want authorities to be commissioning from their local colleges the adult skills provision that they believe their area can benefit from.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Although the budget is enhanced, it is only a finite amount. Given that, it is important that we consider where it will have the most effect. Does the Minister agree that those funds are best targeted at young adults, the low-skilled and those actively seeking work?

Nick Boles: I agree with my hon. Friend. That is what is more important is that his local combined authority and those of other hon. Members are best placed to identify the particular groups or industries with particular needs, and then respond accordingly.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Further education colleges in Scotland are the largest providers of apprenticeship education. Will they therefore be exempt from the apprenticeship levy?

Nick Boles: The apprenticeship levy will apply to all employers throughout the United Kingdom with a payroll bill of more than £3 million. Of course, there is absolutely nothing to prevent any employer in Scotland that is paying the levy from putting pressure on whoever is in government in Scotland after this Thursday to make sure that they increase their investment in apprenticeships, as we are doing in England.

Mr Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): Tucked away in the autumn statement was the Government’s admission that they will be cutting—they’re term is “efficiencies”—£360 million of adult skills non-apprenticeship funding between now and 2020. Does the Minister not see that there is a paradox in the Government going hell for leather on English and maths for young people’s apprenticeships while failing to ring-fence funding for basic skills, when England has 9 million people of working age with low literacy and numeracy, and we are ranked bottom in literacy and next-to-bottom in numeracy among 23 developed nations? Last year, the Government cut the adult skills budget across England by 18%. Now they have scrapped plans for advanced post-24 skills. Why is the Government’s key White Paper addressing technical skills shortages being delayed? Is all this a strategy or a wing and a prayer?
Nick Boles: There was a lot of detail in the hon. Gentleman’s question, but not a lot of clarity, so here is the clarity: we are increasing total funding available for further education by 40% in cash terms during this Parliament. He talks about last year because he does not like this year, and that is because this year’s spend tells the story of a Government investing in skills for the future.

Apprenticeships

5. Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage businesses to take on apprentices.

The Minister for Skills (Nick Boles): We have removed employers’ national insurance from apprentices under the age of 25, and are introducing an apprenticeship levy for larger employers, which will increase the budget for apprenticeship training in England to £2.5 billion in 2019-20.

Andrew Stephenson: To mark national apprenticeship week, I visited Silentnight in Barnoldswick, whose award-winning apprenticeship scheme has already created over 40 full-time jobs. Does the Minister agree that companies such as Silentnight, which is seeing real year-on-year sales growth at the moment because of its apprentices, are great examples to employers across Pendle and the rest of the UK?

Nick Boles: I particularly welcome the example of Silentnight in my hon. Friend’s constituency, because it is really important to understand that apprentices add value to their employers—they are not just receiving training; they are also adding value. We consistently hear employers saying that apprentices bring energy, ideas, enthusiasm and new contacts to their businesses.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is becoming increasingly clear that the systems and processes needed to implement the apprenticeship levy are far from ready. Many see it as a tax on jobs. The Scottish National party has tabled an amendment to the Finance Bill to seek a full review, and the CBI has called for a radical rethink. I am grateful to the Minister for meeting me and representatives of the oil and gas sector recently. He well knows the continuing issues with double charging. Will he heed these calls and delay implementation of the apprenticeship scheme in the future?

Nick Boles: The number of BIS staff who will be working on the apprenticeship programme will fall, but only because we are setting up a new, independent institute for apprenticeships that will take over many of the jobs that are currently undertaken by BIS staff. That institute will be in the control of the employers who are paying the levy. I think that is the right way to do it and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will welcome it.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): Businesses such as Rotork, BMT and Designability in Bath have taken on hundreds of new apprentices since the scheme first started, enabling young people to gain the best qualifications for a really great career. Does my hon. Friend agree, however, that although the Government are doing a great deal to encourage older people into apprenticeship schemes, a cultural shift is required to encourage even more into the scheme in the future?

Nick Boles: I think my hon. Friend is right about that, because there is a common misconception that apprenticeships are somehow only really appropriate for school leavers, whereas the reality is that they offer opportunities to people at all stages in their lives, and indeed at all stages in their careers. It is not just for new recruits to an employer; it can be for somebody who has been working for an employer for several years but has discovered that they have the potential to develop.

Employing People on the Autistic Spectrum

6. Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the support and guidance for businesses on employing people on the autistic spectrum.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman): Through our one nation reforms, we are committed to a labour market that allows everyone to fulfil their obligations and opportunities wherever and whoever they are, including those with autism. That is why the Prime Minister launched the Disability Confident campaign, and why we have continued to spend over £100 million a year on the Access to Work scheme, helping over 36,000 people with disabilities into work. We have published guidance to employers on
employing people with autism, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Skills and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise recently met Autism UK and the all-party group on autism.

Dr Cameron: The autism employment gap is much larger than the disability employment gap, with only 15% in full-time employment and 26% of graduates remaining employed. We are losing the potential that people with autism spectrum disorder can offer to our economy. What specific programmes and support will be provided to employers and jobseekers to close this startling gap, and will the Government produce disaggregated data to evidence progress?

George Freeman: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and I pay tribute to her work on this. As I said, we are investing substantially in this area, and through the Disability Confident campaign, we are actively engaging with employers of different sizes and sectors to promote access to work for people with autism. We launched the latest part of that campaign on World Autism day, on 2 April. We do not think that quotas are the right way to go. We want to encourage employers and we want those with autism to know that good employers will recognise and reward their skills.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Many skill-based jobs are perfect for people suffering from autism, with computer coding and programming being a prime example, given the rigid structure of the work. Will the Minister work with me to help promote coding within Cornwall and to support people who wish to get involved in skill-based work?

George Freeman: I would be delighted to work with my hon. Friend and with other Ministers in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Department for Work and Pensions, and I commend him for his leadership on this excellent initiative.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): When will the Government follow the example of Leicester City football club and try to get into the premiership on this question? There are so many talented people on the autism spectrum desperate and waiting for a job, many of them in regions such as Yorkshire, yet we are faced with uncertainty for everyone—apprentices, people with autism—because of this great cloud that is the possibility of our leaving the EU. No one is investing or hiring.

George Freeman: Even for me, it would be a stretch to delve into the EU on this question. The Government are investing £100 million a year in the Access to Work scheme, helping 36,000 people with disabilities into work, so we are absolutely committed to this agenda. People with autism have a lot to offer in the workplace, and we are serious about giving them opportunities.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): April is Autism Awareness month, and earlier this month, The Economist led with an article on how the talents and skills of people with autism and on the autistic spectrum are potentially being wasted. It said that if businesses were encouraged to take more friendly approaches to recruitment and to deploy the appropriate skills, we could have many more people in the workplace. We had a fascinating and moving debate last week on autism, during which many Members shared moving experiences of their own children, including my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Mike Weir) and the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan). Will the Minister meet me and a cross-party delegation to discuss how we can get businesses properly to mark the number of people on the autism spectrum and how we can work together more across the House?

Mr Speaker: I was going to invite the hon. Lady to seek an Adjournment debate, until I realised that in fact she had had it.

George Freeman: I will restrict my answer, Mr Speaker. The right meeting would be with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, whose Department leads on this issue, and with the Ministers for Skills and for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise. We are actively engaging with all the relevant charities on this issue.

Mr Speaker: I hope that the hon. Lady is content with that answer, although, whether she is or is not, she has had it.

Digital Industries

7. Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of a UK withdrawal from the EU on the UK’s digital industries. [904769]

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to take Question 7 with Question 14, if that is okay.

We think that leaving the EU would be an absolute disaster for Britain’s digital industries.

Mr Speaker: It would be okay, if the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) were here, but he isn’t, so it isn’t, but we will proceed unabashed by his absence, because we have the right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown).

Mr Brown: The digital sector is very important to the north-east of England, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) made clear earlier. Some 25,000 jobs are now directly involved in the sector. What reassurance can the Minister give the House that there will be market access arrangements with our partners in the EU in the event of a no vote?

Mr Vaizey: I am afraid that I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman that reassurance, and that is what really worries me about our leaving the EU. Not only does the digital industry provide the 25,000 jobs he mentioned but overall it represents about 7% of the UK’s gross value added. We are at the heart of negotiating the digital single market, which will give our digital industries even more opportunities, and that is why we must stay in.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I was at a breakfast meeting this morning with digitech companies from Vancouver in British Columbia that are here on an inward trade mission, looking at investing in the UK.
Does the Minister agree that this dangerous and damaging remain campaign, which is based wholly on a fear of leaving the European Union that is not justified, is going to do great damage? Has he done any assessment of how much damage is being done to investment by the talking down of this country by those who want us to remain in servitude to the EU?

Mr Vaizey: I hear what my hon. Friend has to say, but I wish the leave campaign would stop running this terrible fear campaign. I am confident that we are going to stay in Europe and continue to attract investment. I am pleased to hear that our Canadian trade envoy, to which I gather my hon. Friend had access, shows us how even as members of the European Union, we can still negotiate and engage globally with many other countries. Being a member of the European Union does not prevent us from working with countries outside the EU, and the leave campaign’s fear campaign has to stop saying it does.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): On Sunday, the European Union slashed roaming charges by 75%, and they will be abolished altogether next year. That is a huge boost to British businesses with European ambitions as well as to Leicester City fans, now with Champions league travel to plan. The UK is Europe’s biggest digital economy. We buy and sell more online than any other country. Would the Minister like to estimate how long it would take him, even with his fabled charm, to renegotiate all our international digital agreements in the event of a Brexit, and what our £118 billion digital economy would do in the meantime?

Mr Vaizey: I think it would take ages—it would take absolutely years to renegotiate. I recently returned from a G7 meeting in Japan, proving again that the leave campaign’s fear campaign is completely wrong. I was able to spend some time with the European vice-president, talking about the great opportunities that the digital single market presents. It was a lot of fun. We want to be part of that digital single market—growing for Britain.

Steel Industry

8. Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the most significant threats to the UK steel industry.

Sajid Javid (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): On Sunday, the European Union slashed roaming charges by 75%, and they will be abolished altogether next year. That is a huge boost to British businesses with European ambitions as well as to Leicester City fans, now with Champions league travel to plan. The UK is Europe’s biggest digital economy. We buy and sell more online than any other country. Would the Minister like to estimate how long it would take him, even with his fabled charm, to renegotiate all our international digital agreements in the event of a Brexit, and what our £118 billion digital economy would do in the meantime?

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Steel Industry

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is right about the importance of time for securing a viable long-term future for the Tata strip business. I have had a number of discussions, as have my officials, with Tata. It has been very straightforward in being reasonable about time—of course, it does not have an unlimited amount of time, but it has shown through the long products business that it understands that things take time.

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his approach—particularly to Tata and Neath Port Talbot in south Wales, but also to Celsa Steel in Cardiff. Some £76 million has already been given in compensation to high-energy users and the Government are projected to spend, I hope, £100 million this year. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that and clarify what future support we can give to high-energy steelmakers?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issue of Celsa Steel, which has made a substantial investment in the UK, employing hundreds of people, and we want to see that continue. The price of electricity is very important to Celsa and other steel producers. We have already extended the compensation available and we have announced that we will move towards exemption, which I think will help Celsa and many others.

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for attending the Thursday sitting of the Select Committee, which is conducting an inquiry on steel. He may recall that I asked him about the maintaining of confidence. There is growing concern that firms are not supplying to Tata facilities because they fear that the steel business may go into administration and they will not be paid, and credit insurance is being withdrawn. Businesses that supplied SSI do not want to get their fingers burnt twice, and customers, especially those with long-term horizons, are looking to Tata’s competitors for alternative provision. What further firm steps will the Government take on the matter of credit insurance to ensure that word goes out, loudly and with clarity, that this is a viable operation and firms can supply to and buy from Tata with confidence?

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his Committee’s work on this matter, which is helpful to the debate and enables us to look more closely at the position. As for the question of suppliers to Tata, and, indeed, large customers, I have already written to, or asked officials to write to, all the suppliers and customers of Tata Steel strip products. We have contacted the largest suppliers and the largest customers, as has Tata, which has given its reassurance on this point as well. However, I think that the main reassurance I can give relates to the approach of the Government, who are doing all that they can to secure a long-term, viable future for the business.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I would argue that Tata Steel in Corby is a vital component of the midlands engine. Bearing in mind all the commercial sensitivities,
will the Secretary of State update us on exactly what point has been reached in the discussions that are taking place with the aim of securing its future?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend’s approach is commendable, as is the work that he is doing in Corby to secure Tata Steel’s future. As I hope he understands, there is a limited amount that we can say about what is a very commercially sensitive process, but let me reassure him that we are doing everything we can.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Does the Secretary of State agree that it is of strategic importance to the economies of Wales and the wider United Kingdom to keep the blast furnaces in Port Talbot operational following any future takeover? Will he consider introducing a steelmaking-specific enterprise incentive scheme, as advocated in the management buyout proposal, to provide the fiscal incentive that is required to safeguard steelmaking in Wales?

Sajid Javid: I agree with the hon. Gentleman in that I, too, want to see a future for steelmaking in Wales, and we are doing everything that we can to help with that. He mentioned the management buyout proposal. We are taking a very careful look at that, and would, of course, be willing to work with those involved.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What action is my right hon. Friend taking to help UK steel suppliers to win Government contracts, and to ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises in the supply chain benefit from those opportunities?

Sajid Javid: That is a good question. As my hon. Friend will know, we have already changed procurement rules so that they can take economic and social factors into account. We are also making the pipeline of deals much more visible, and targeting at SMEs in particular.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Carwyn Jones, the Labour First Minister in Wales, who is at Port Talbot again today, had a package of support in place immediately after Tata’s announcement of its intention to sell. Now that the UK Government have belatedly woken up and followed that lead, how confident is the Secretary of State that Tata’s true intention is to be responsible? It took over a year to sort out long products, and Tata wants this to be done and dusted—including due diligence—by the end of June. Does the Secretary of State think that that is a realistic prospect?

Sajid Javid: We are working with the Labour First Minister and his Government. Both Governments understand just how important this is, and I think it is also important for us to continue to work together. As for the question of timing, I believe, as I said earlier, that Tata is sincere in its commitment to a reasonable time frame and a reasonable process. I have no reason to think that that will not be the case. Tata continues to show flexibility, and I hope that things stay that way.

Business Start-ups

9. Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support people who want to start their own businesses.

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): We have a growing and healthy economy, which is good for all business, but which, in particular, encourages people who want to start up their own businesses. We are looking at ways in which we can improve, for example, practices for self-employed people, which is also very helpful. Our start-up loans scheme has provided more than 37,000 loans worth over £210 million.

Wendy Morton: In my constituency, the number of registered businesses increased by about 10% between 2014 and 2015. As I am sure my right hon. Friend will agree, that is very welcome. I recently visited Streetly Vets, a new business that has been set up by two sisters in my constituency. Does my right hon. Friend agree, however, that the first few years of being in business can be some of the most challenging, and will she assure me that the Government are doing all that they can to support new and small businesses?

Anna Soubry: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that it is the first few years that are the trickiest. If you can jump that hurdle, you can achieve almost anything: you can certainly make sure that your business will grow. I have explained about the start-up loans that we do, but the other great achievement of this Government in the past 12 months is our work on cutting business rates. This has been the biggest ever cut in business rates, reducing the burden by £6.7 billion, which will benefit 900,000 smaller properties. That is very good news, especially for small businesses.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Small businesses might like to start up in the town centre of New Ferry in my constituency, except that footfall has gone through the floor and the Co-op and Lloyds bank are now closing. Who should my constituents blame for the dereliction? Is it the Tory Ministers who withdrew from regeneration, or is it the absentee landlords who bought up property and are now nowhere to be seen?

Anna Soubry: I really do not think it is as simple as that. It is unfortunate that when bad news is delivered it is often turned into a party political football. There are all sorts of reasons why a number of high streets continue to have difficulties. Equally, there are all manner of solutions that can be used to turn them around. I would ask the hon. Lady to look at some of the successes of Conservative, Labour and indeed Lib Dem councils in helping and supporting their high streets. Most importantly I would suggest that, rather than talking down her high street, she should be talking it up.

Apprenticeships

10. Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to increase take-up of apprenticeships among (a) people with disabilities, (b) care leavers and (c) other disadvantaged groups.

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade (Sajid Javid): We want to ensure that apprenticeships are accessible to the widest possible range of people. We are promoting reasonable adjustments for disabled learners and fully
funding apprenticeship training for young people aged 19 to 24 with an education, health and care plan and for care leavers up to the age of 24.

Vicky Foxcroft: As the Government already have targets to increase the proportion of black and minority ethnic apprenticeships by 20%, does the Minister not agree that they should do the same for people with disabilities and for care leavers?

Sajid Javid: I agree that we should do all that we can, and we have made it a huge priority to help more individuals with learning difficulties and disabilities to take up apprenticeships. We have done this by providing guidance for individuals and working with employers to help them better to understand what more we can do. Our apprenticeship revolution will leave no one behind.

21. [904774] Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): Is the Secretary of State aware that the Construction Industry Training Board, which is based in Bircham Newton in my constituency, has been excellent at encouraging people with disabilities to take up apprenticeships? Can he confirm that when the CITB’s existing levy is merged with the apprenticeship levy, it will still have sufficient funding to carry on with its excellent programmes? Will he come up to Bircham Newton to visit the CITB at some stage during his tenure?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the good work of the CITB in this regard, and when the apprenticeship levy is introduced from April 2017, we can make sure that it continues to have the funding available to do the same kind of work.

Tax Returns

12. Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the potential effect on small and medium-sized enterprises of proposed changes to filing of tax returns. [904774]

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): I talk to Treasury Ministers on a continuing basis, and in my ministerial role I am more than happy to take up the cause of small businesses. I met representatives of the Federation of Small Businesses only last week and they reiterated their concerns about the proposals, but of course this is not a mandatory filing every quarter; it is effectively good bookkeeping. They raised their concerns and I am more than happy to listen to them and, most importantly, to represent them to the Treasury. Also, a consultation is taking place, so there is always room to make sure that we continue to do the right thing.

Ruth Cadbury: I am glad that the Minister is listening. My constituent Sheila Knight is the director of a small local business and she is very concerned about the proposal to make businesses submit data quarterly to HMRC. She says:

“It will cause a huge amount of extra work, expense and worry for absolutely no benefit. Like most small businesses, I collate my accounts information once a year and give it to my accountant. Having to do this four times a year will be a huge imposition and my accountant’s fees will be pro rata more expensive.”

Does the Minister not agree that what small businesses need is strategic support from the Government, not more bureaucracy and unnecessary cost?

Anna Soubry: It is about reducing bureaucracy and cutting costs for small businesses. It is not a quarterly tax return; it is good, sensible bookkeeping, which good businesses do anyway. Keeping the books in good condition every quarter will help small businesses when they come to submit their annual returns. I am more than happy to meet the hon. Lady’s constituent and explain things to her, because there is a lot of misinformation.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I am pleased to hear that the Minister has met the Federation of Small Businesses, of which I am a proud member. From that meeting, she will know that 60% of small businesses do not currently use digital accounting systems. Does the Minister understand the rising level of anxiety in that part of the business community? Does she agree that it might be sensible for the Treasury to consider introducing the system on a voluntary basis, which made self-assessment such a success when it was introduced all those years ago?

Anna Soubry: My hon. Friend makes a good point. There will always be good, full support for this digital movement. The other thing that is of concern to some small businesses is access to superfast broadband, because there is no point in doing this unless a business has it. Many small businesses are reticent to get up to speed—if I can put it that way—but I am confident that, with the excellent work of my hon. Friend the Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy, we are making huge progress and ensuring that all businesses have access to superfast broadband.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Minister has singularly failed to explain how the change will help businesses. I do not know whether she has ever produced a set of business accounts, but the Financial Secretary to the Treasury told MPs in a Westminster Hall debate in January that it would require a “a summary of income and expenses.”—[Official Report, 25 January 2016; Vol. 605, c. 36WH.]

As every businessperson knows, that can be done only by putting together the full detail each quarter. Whether the Minister calls it reporting, filing or updating, her claim that the change represents a reduction in red tape is laughable. It is a major increase in bureaucracy, administration and costs, especially for those businesses without digital access. The Government should go away and think again.

Anna Soubry: I am one of those who actually had a real job or two before coming to this place. I can therefore assure the hon. Gentleman that, as a self-employed barrister, I absolutely did have to provide accounts each week, but I do not claim to have run a business of more than just myself and maybe one other. The most important thing is that these are not quarterly returns. The hon. Gentleman really should understand what is proposed. It is actually a good way of ensuring that small businesses always keep up to date with how their business is going. The change will enable businesses to do their annual returns considerably better.


The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade (Sajid Javid): The Government committed in their manifesto to cut £10 billion of business red tape through the business impact target. We will report on our progress in June this year.

William Wragg: The Government are doing well to cut regulation at home, but we cannot ignore the fact that the most burdensome regulations on British companies come from the European Union and cost British business £22 billion a year. Given that there were 1,469 new pieces of EU regulation and 51 EU directives in 2015, is it not clear that the only way to end the cost to British business is to vote to leave?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issue of cutting business regulation, but I do not recognise the £22 billion a year figure for EU regulation. I am sure that he will agree that as well as looking at the costs of regulation, we should consider the benefits of the single market. With 300 million consumers, it is the world’s largest economic zone, and there is no doubt that it helps to generate jobs throughout Britain, including in Greater Manchester.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that many small businesses often apply to only one lender for finance—usually their bank—and that two in five of those turned down do not go on to apply for finance anywhere else. What more are the Government doing to ensure that small businesses have access to as good a range of financial products as possible to keep the economy moving in the right direction?

Sajid Javid: First, the hon. Gentleman may know that one of the changes brought in during the coalition Government was that if a small business’s application for credit is refused, that application can be passed on, with the business’s permission, to other potential lenders. That has certainly helped to change the landscape. We can also help to increase competition, on which the Treasury has been leading. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the number of providers of SME finance, he will see that there has been a dramatic change there, too.

Productivity

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): Productivity, measured as output per hour worked, increased by 1% in 2015 as a whole—the largest annual increase since 2011—and is now 1.7% higher than it was in 2008.

Jo Cox: The reality is that this Government’s record on productivity has been one of failure. Last July, they launched their deeply underwhelming productivity plan, which was damned by the Select Committee on Business, Innovation and Skills as “a vague collection of existing policies”,

the Committee warning that it risked “collecting dust on Whitehall bookshelves”. Can the Minister update the House on what steps she is taking to improve on the Government’s record to date?

Anna Soubry: I am sorry that it seems the hon. Lady did not hear my answer; I remind her that productivity is now 1.7% higher than it was in 2008 and we saw its largest annual increase since 2011 only last year. I do not know where she is getting her information from—I have my suspicions—but unfortunately she is wrong. This Government are absolutely committed to improving productivity, and we have already heard, by way of example, the Minister for Skills talking about the work we are doing to ensure that we have the right skills—that is an essential part of an effective productivity plan.

Topical Questions

T1. [904787] Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade (Sajid Javid): Ministers and officials across government continue to work around the clock to support Britain’s steel industry—I have updated the House on progress several times and will continue to do so, whenever appropriate; our two major pieces of legislation, the Enterprise Bill and the Trade Union Bill, are moving closer to the statute book; and we are on the verge of naming the National Environment Research Council’s new polar research vessel. The final decision on that will be made by the Minister for Universities and Science—Joey McJoface, as we like to call him.

Julie Elliott: In The Sunday Times this week it was reported that meetings are taking place in France to look at how people could take advantage of getting business from the UK in the event of a Brexit vote. Does the Secretary of State agree that remaining in the EU is vital for British trade, particularly in the automotive and aerospace industries, and for the health of the British economy as a whole?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I agree with the hon. Lady on that. She mentioned the automotive and aerospace industries, two of our strongest manufacturing sectors in the UK, which rely heavily on a supply chain that is international—much of it is in Europe. Equally, she could mention our services industries, which account for 80% of our GDP.

T6. [904792] Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Does the Secretary of State accept that the proposals to allow waiters and waitresses, rather than restaurant owners, to actually receive tips given to them will be warmly welcomed? Does he not think that the House of Commons should show a lead, because in our own restaurants the agency workers and part-time workers who serve Members and their guests do not receive tips?

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. May I begin by thanking and paying a huge tribute to everybody who works in this place, especially those in our catering services? They often have to work
the most unsocial hours and often do so in the most
difficult of conditions, as they suddenly have a huge
influx of us going into the Tea Room or wherever it
might be. We perhaps underestimate the work they do.
My right hon. Friend makes a very good point and I
would be more than happy to take this up with the
House authorities. In the meantime, I congratulate my
right hon. Friend. Friend the Secretary of State on rightly
launching this consultation, as when someone, in any
facility, pays a tip, they expect the person to whom they
want that tip to go to receive it—all of it. I think this
will allow us to begin to see real progress, so that we do
the right thing on this.

**Ms Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): Two Select
Committees of this House are now preparing to examine
the collapse of BHS into administration last week,
putting at risk 11,000 jobs. Sir Philip Green bought the
company for £200 million, took hundreds of millions of
pounds out of it in dividend payments for his own
family and then sold it for £1 to a bankrupt with no
retail experience. What does the Business Secretary
think are the issues for public policy as he contemplates
the current situation? Does he think this represents
responsible ownership?

**Sajid Javid:** The hon. Lady is right to raise that issue.
As she said, two Select Committees are already looking
into it, and considerable concern has been expressed in
Parliament. I share some of those concerns, which is
why I can inform her that today I have written to the
chief executive of the Insolvency Service and instructed
her to commence an investigation immediately. She has
agreed to do so, and I will make both those letters—mine
and hers—available in the Libraries of both Houses
later today.

**Ms Eagle:** That is good news and I certainly welcome
the steps that the Business Secretary has taken. During
Sir Philip Green’s stewardship of BHS, the pension
fund went from a surplus to a black hole of £571 million.
What options do the Government and the pensions
regulator now have to ensure that Sir Philip Green pays
his fair share of that huge liability? Does the Secretary
of State agree that the Pension Protection Fund was
defined benefit pension schemes, there are many in
front of them. She will also know that, when it comes to
deficit, and just because one is in deficit does not
deficit, and just because one is in deficit does not

**Sajid Javid:** Hopefully, the hon. Lady will understand
that it would be wrong of me, and of anyone else, to
take out any particular individual. That is for independent
investigators to look at by examining the evidence in
front of them. She will also know that, when it comes to
defined benefit pension schemes, there are many in
deficit, and just because one is in deficit does not
necessarily mean that there has been some kind of
wrongdoing. As I have said, I have instructed the Insolvency
Service to commence an investigation, but she should
also be reassured that the pension regulator will be
looking into this matter.

**T10. [904796] James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley
Regis) (Con): There are 850,000 dementia sufferers
in the UK, and that number is set to double over the next
few years. What is the Minister doing to encourage
British scientists to be as innovative as possible in
delivering on improved care for those suffering from
dementia?

**The Minister for Universities and Science (Joseph
Johnson):** We took the decision to protect the science
budget, enabling us to invest and put the UK at the
front of tackling diseases such as dementia. In addition,
a Government investment of £150 million has been
announced by the Prime Minister to establish a dementia
research institute. I am pleased to confirm that two
leading charities, the Alzheimer’s Society and Alzheimer’s
Research UK, have now pledged a further £100 million
towards the project. The Medical Research Council will
be looking for an inspirational director to lead the
institute and bring together the collective experience
that exists in the UK and worldwide.

**Ms Eagle:** It is a good news story. Does the Minister
think that we should do more to ensure that those
UK taxpayers who were left with tens of millions of pounds
to pay out in redundancy payments will the Secretary of State ensure that the
report that he commissioned on Comet and the Comet
scandal is published?

**Sajid Javid:** The hon. Lady will know that the report
was commissioned by my predecessor. I will take a close
look at what she has said and get back to her.
Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Given the hope of renewed trade links between the UK and Iran, which will be dependent on good communication, does my right hon. Friend consider that now is the right time to withdraw accreditation for Persian GCSE and A-level?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of trade with Iran. She will know that that is why the Government have announced a trade mission that will take place soon. If more people in the UK speak Persian, that will help. I will happily take up the matter with my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary.

T4. [904790] Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I welcome the fact that BHS administrators have entered consultation with USDAW, the retail union, for the lack of consultation was in part to blame for the pension fund going from a £5 million surplus to a £571 million deficit. In the light of that, will the Secretary of State consider the case that there should be enhanced employee rights, in particular in this aspect of companies law?

Sajid Javid: As I said earlier, it would be wrong of anyone to jump to conclusions about the pension fund and the reason for the deficit. The right way forward is for independent regulators to take a look.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I am a champion of the Sutton Trust and the inquiry by the all-party parliamentary group on social mobility into access into leading professions. What is the Department doing to support our leading professions to work with schools and universities to build up the schools base, so that more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds can access our top professions?

Joseph Johnson: We have established the Careers & Enterprise Company to make sure that all young people know about the opportunities available to them through our higher education reforms. We are also giving students more information than ever before about their course choice, and we have introduced degree apprenticeships as a new route into the professions. We want to see universities playing their part too, which is why I have asked the director of fair access to continue to focus on access to the professions in his work with universities.

T5. [904791] Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): A total of 11,000 BHS employees face an uncertain future over not just their jobs, but their pensions. Where will the Secretary of State place responsibility for filling the pension fund black hole? Will he be with the taxpayer or with the owners of the company, who paid themselves more than £400 million in dividends while the pension fund was driven into the ground?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that if, sadly, defined benefit pension funds have trouble, we have the Pension Protection Fund in place, but of course we should always examine why a pension fund may need recourse to the PPF. That job should be done by independent regulators, not politicians.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The HCF CATCH training facility in my constituency was established 10 years ago as a partnership between the local authority and the private sector, since when 800 apprentices have passed through its doors. May I invite my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State or the Skills Minister to visit it? Does he agree that such a partnership is the way forward?

Nick Boles: I feel sure that my hon. Friend is slightly disappointed to have just a Lincolnshire neighbour coming to visit him, but if he can put up with me, I would be delighted to do so.

T8. [904794] Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): In the Secretary of State’s discussions with Tata, will he have time to raise Tata’s involvement in the outsourcing of up to 800 jobs from British Airways, including its centre in south Manchester, which supplies jobs to my constituents and has already announced 80 redundancies? As The Daily Telegraph revealed last week, this is another example where Tata’s actions threaten our national security along with our jobs, so will the Government step in to protect both?

Sajid Javid: If the hon. Lady wants to send me more detailed information about that, I will gladly take a closer look.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Why should 100% of British businesses have to comply with EU regulations when less than 10% of them export to the EU?

Sajid Javid: I touched earlier on the importance of the single market. It is the largest single market in the world, with 500 million consumers, and it brings huge benefits to British businesses in growth and jobs.

T9. [904795] Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State reconsider the decision to scrap bursaries for nurses? First, that will deter mature students and people from black and minority ethnic communities and disadvantaged communities, and secondly, while nurses are training, they spend 50% of their time doing practical work, looking after people. It is unfair that they should pay to provide services to others.

Nick Boles: What I share with the hon. Lady is a determination to ensure that the groups she mentioned and other groups that have been discussed today have the maximum opportunity, particularly in the NHS. That is one reason why we are making great steps towards developing a new nursing apprenticeship, which will offer people a way into the profession, gaining that qualification while they are working and earning.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): Alas, there is no law against selling a company to a bunch of clowns, which is a great pity for the employees and pension holders of British Home Stores. However, there is an expectation that the public should be able to look to the advisers in such a sale—the lawyers and accountants—to live up to their responsibilities and to do their duty. Will my right hon. Friend look carefully at the templates and responsibilities for advisers in transactions so that we do not see another great British company sold to a bunch of muppets?

Sajid Javid: I can reassure my hon. Friend of that. He has spoken eloquently on this issue a number of times, and he knows it well. We will learn lessons from the collapse of any company, but especially one as important and as large as BHS. As I said earlier, there will now be...
an investigation by the Insolvency Service, which I have instructed to start today, and we will certainly draw lessons from the outcome of that and other investigations.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must move on.
Aleppo

3.36 pm

Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab) (Urgent Question):

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Aleppo, Syria.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The Syrian conflict has entered its sixth year. As a result of Assad's brutality and the terror of Daesh, half the population have been displaced and more than 13 million people are in need of humanitarian aid. The UN special envoy, Staffan de Mistura, estimates that as many as 400,000 people might have been killed as a direct result of the conflict.

Our long-term goal is for Syria to become a stable, peaceful state with an inclusive Government capable of protecting their people from Daesh and other extremists. Only when that happens can stability be returned to the region, which is necessary to stem the flow of people fleeing Syria and seeking refuge in Europe.

We have been working hard to find a political solution to the conflict. There have been three rounds of UN-facilitated peace negotiations in Geneva this year—in February, March and April. The latest round concluded on 27 April without significant progress on the vital issue of political transition. We have always been clear that negotiations will make progress only if the cessation of hostilities is respected, full humanitarian access is granted and both sides are prepared to discuss political transition.

The escalating violence over the past two weeks, especially around Aleppo, has been an appalling breach of the cessation of hostilities agreement. On 27 April, the al-Quds hospital in Aleppo city was bombed, killing civilians, including two doctors, and destroying vital equipment. More than a dozen hospitals in the city have already been closed because of air strikes, leaving only a few operating. The humanitarian situation is desperate. According to human rights monitors, at least 253 civilians, including 49 children, have been killed in the city in the last fortnight alone.

At midnight on Friday, following international diplomatic efforts between the US and Russia, a renewed cessation came into effect in Latakia and eastern Ghouta in Damascus. We understand that this has reduced some of the violence in Latakia, but the situation remains shaky in eastern Ghouta.

The situation in Aleppo remains very fluid indeed. The Assad regime continues to threaten a major offensive on the city. There were some reports of a cessation of attacks overnight, but we have received reports indicating that violence has continued this morning. We need swift action to stop the fighting. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is speaking to Secretary Kerry today to discuss how we can preserve the cessation.

We look to Russia, with its unique influence over parties to the conflict, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and Russia, to put pressure on all sides to stop all attacks on civilian targets, including hospitals. Does the Minister have evidence that Russian forces have been directly involved in the latest air strikes? If they were, does he agree that it is surely time for fresh sanctions against Russia? Is it not now also time for his Department, along with the Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development, to look again at airdrops to besieged communities? Why can we not join forces with our European allies to get food to starving people? Would not airdrops also put the regime under renewed pressure to grant more traditional and reliable land access?

On accountability, is the Minister's Department involved in collecting evidence to enable eventual war crimes trials, as we did during the Balkans conflict? I understand that the Commission for International Justice and Accountability, which is funded by the UK and US Governments, has evidence to link abuses to the highest level in the Syrian state.

On refugees, given the escalation of the violence in Aleppo and the lack of medical care now available there, what more can the UK do to get the most vulnerable people out of harm's way? Surely, given what we know about the horror which many of the refugee children in Europe have fled, it is now time to end the Government's shameful refusal to give 3,000 unaccompanied children sanctuary here in the UK.

While I am a huge fan of President Obama—indeed, I worked for him in North Carolina in 2008—I believe that both he and the Prime Minister made the biggest misjudgment of their time in office when they put Syria on the “too difficult” pile and, instead of engaging fully,
wartime and put their faith in a policy of containment. This judgment, made by both leaders for different reasons, will, I believe, be judged harshly by history, and it has been nothing short of a foreign policy disaster. However, there is still time for both men to write a postscript to this failure. Does the Minister agree that it is time for the leaders of both our countries, even in the midst of two hotly contested political campaigns, to launch a joint, bold initiative to protect civilians, to get aid to besieged communities, and to throw our collective weight behind the fragile peace talks before they fail? I do not believe that either President Obama or the Prime Minister tried to do harm in Syria but, as is said, sometimes all it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.

Mr Ellwood: First, may I pay tribute to the hon. Lady's work as chair of the all-party friends of Syria group? It is important that the House is kept up to date with the fluid events taking place in that country. Let me qualify her remarks: the Foreign Secretary is returning from an important visit to Latin America; otherwise, he would be in the Chamber responding on this very important matter.

The hon. Lady raised a number of issues and I will do my best to go through them efficiently. First, I absolutely concur with her: it is Syria that is very much responsible for the significant number of deaths of people in the country of all religions, particularly the Sunnis. That is why we call on Russia to use its influence to bring Assad to account and to make sure that we can get access. Following the previous ceasefire, we gained access to about a third of the areas that we could not previously get to. We hope that we can unlock the situation and get access in the forthcoming days.

The hon. Lady mentioned methods of delivery, particularly airdrops. There are places in Daesh-held territory where it is possible, because of air superiority, to fly slow and low enough to drop aid packages accurately, but that is not the case for some of the conurbations and communities in the built-up areas. Aleppo is Syria's largest city by some margin, and not only are the opposition and the Assad Government there; al-Nusra is there as well. Without the regime's support—it has air superiority—we cannot carry out the airdrops that the hon. Lady would like. It is better to get agreement from Assad to take trucks straight into those places so that they can go directly to the people in need. Airdrops can land randomly. They often get into the wrong hands and do not help the very vulnerable whom we wish to support.

The hon. Lady mentioned the role of other countries, including Saudi Arabia. Foreign Minister al-Jubeir is in Geneva with John Kerry at the moment, playing his role. Let us not forget that it was Saudi Arabia that brought together the opposition groups in the first place in December, which began the three rounds of talks that have taken place.

The hon. Lady talked about the importance of collecting evidence. We had a very good debate two weeks ago about genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. We must not lose that leading role in making sure that people are brought to justice. As we saw in the case of the former Serbian-Bosnian leader, Radovan Karadžić, sometimes the process takes many years, but we are actively and heavily involved—we are likely to make more effort—in making sure that we collect the evidence as we speak.

The hon. Lady made an interesting comment about placing Syria on the "too difficult" pile. I ask the House to consider how different Syria might look if, in August 2013, we had voted in favour of punitive bomb strikes. Daesh did not even exist in Syria at that time—it had no foothold whatsoever. Instead, this House stepped back from that decision, and I think that we will live to regret that.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Back in February, President Assad described retaking the whole of Syria as "a goal we are seeking to achieve without hesitation", but he was slapped down by the Russian ambassador to the United Nations, who said: "I heard President Assad's remarks on television...Of course, they do not chime with the diplomatic efforts that Russia is undertaking".

The Foreign Secretary has admitted that he does not get much out of his conversations with Foreign Minister Lavrov. Does the Minister think that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has the necessary capacity satisfactorily to read Russian interests and intentions?

Mr Ellwood: The key relationship that has developed and that allows us to place greater emphasis on Russia—whether it be Putin, Lavrov or Bogdanov—is that with John Kerry. The closeness with which he is working with the Foreign Secretary shows that we are playing our part as well. From a humanitarian perspective, we are the second largest donor to the country. We are playing our part on the humanitarian aspect as well as with regard to the military. We are very much at the forefront of activities but, ultimately, it is not for the Americans or the British but for Russia to determine that it is going to place pressure on Assad to allow access to the very areas into which we need to get humanitarian aid.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his response and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Butley and Spen (Jo Cox) on securing this urgent question. In the short time that she has been in the House, she has consistently stood up for the people of Syria who are caught in this appalling conflict.

The whole House can unite in condemning last week's air strikes and shelling in Aleppo. In particular, as is recognised by the Geneva convention, there is never any justification for attacking hospitals. The bravery and commitment of the medics who remained in Aleppo stand in sharp contrast to the cowardice and brutality of the Assad regime, which once again showed its indifference to the population of Syria. Despite the actions of the Assad regime, we must remain committed to the peace talks and to a political solution to the current conflict.

As a member of the Syria Support Group, Britain has a crucial role to play, particularly in supporting the US-Russia ceasefire talks. Britain ought to be an active contributor to that process. As a leading EU country, we can wield real influence as a member of Russia's most important trading bloc. What discussions are ongoing
at an EU level about exerting pressure on the Russians to redouble their commitment to the ceasefire? As the Minister has stated, Russia is in the strongest position to tell President Assad to stop killing civilians in Aleppo.

Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen, may I ask what specific steps the UK Government are taking with key allies such as Saudi Arabia to encourage the Syrian opposition to recommit to the peace process? Will the Minister comment on reports that the Assad regime used the ceasefire to move troops and prepare for an assault on Aleppo? May I ask whether the negotiations under way in Geneva include provisions for additional monitoring so that all sides can have confidence that a new ceasefire agreement will be genuine?

At the heart of the conflict is a humanitarian disaster of an almost unimaginable scale. Can the Minister assure the House that the UK is pushing for humanitarian access to be at the heart of any new ceasefire agreement? Finally, will the Minister comment on recent reports of an increase in collusion between the Assad regime and Daesh, with the Assad regime stepping back from confronting Daesh in a number of areas while continuing to trade with it and therefore providing vital funds for its campaigns?

Mr Ellwood: I welcome the tone in which the hon. Lady raises these important questions. We have had a series of debates on the matter, and I concur with the hon. Lady in welcoming the work that the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) has done in her role as chair of the friends of Syria all-party group.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) mentioned the Geneva conventions. They are part of collecting the evidence that is necessary in the longer term to bring the culprits to account. That work is ongoing with a number of non-governmental organisations that Britain is supporting. If I may, I will digress to pay tribute to the White Helmets, an organisation that Britain helps to fund, which helps to dig people out of the rubble. Its members are based in these very dangerous areas and are trained to save the lives of civilians who are caught up in them. They go into those disastrous areas with the necessary technology to try to pull survivors out.

The hon. Lady mentioned the role of the EU. Federica Mogherini, the EU High Representative, is a member of the ministerial working group, and she is very much engaged on the matter at the highest level. As I mentioned, the group will be meeting in the very near future.

The hon. Lady talked about the importance of the Syrian opposition and its cohesion. I had the opportunity to meet the president of the Syrian opposition in Istanbul only a couple of weeks ago. The Syrian opposition was pessimistic at that point about the progress that was being made, and now we have seen events unfold. Given its disparate nature and the wide agendas that it follows, the fact that the group has stayed together is an indication of its determination to say, “We do not want to be part of Daesh, but we also do not want to have Assad as our leader.”

The hon. Lady is right to indicate that there is huge collusion, as a matter of convenience, between Assad and Daesh. Reports are coming out that in Palmyra, for example, a deal was struck that Daesh would retreat from that area and the Assad regime would be able to claim that retreat as a victory, but clearly something else was happening behind the scenes.

The hon. Lady alludes to the fact that there have been oil sales. The Assad regime is short of oil supplies and Daesh has crude oil that it can sell, which is another area of mutual convenience. Thankfully, the work we have been doing right across the board on counter-Daesh initiatives is preventing Daesh from being able to produce its oil and therefore to gain financially from oil sales or, indeed, to use the oil itself.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): What is the Government’s current advice to the military opposition to Assad other than Daesh, given that the Government have been sympathetic to the opposition in the past, but it now finds itself in an extremely difficult position?

Mr Ellwood: I made it clear in my opening remarks that a political solution is needed in relation to the Assad regime. We need to move forward with a transition process to ensure the eventual removal of Assad, which will allow the country to unite to take on Daesh itself. However, the two are not mutually exclusive—we can continue our campaign to destroy Daesh. We have already seen the liberation of Ramadi, and I hope that we will see the liberation of the city of Mosul in the near future.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): This is an urgent question, but it would be helpful if we heard more of a tone of urgency in the Government’s response. The destruction of the infrastructure in Aleppo is so wanton that we are beginning to wonder whether there will be anything left worth fighting over. The first priority has to be to have a ceasefire so that humanitarian aid can be supplied to those desperately in need. Are the Government making or supporting preparations to deliver aid as soon as any window of opportunity arises? The second priority has to be a longer-term peace settlement. It would be useful to hear what role the Government see themselves playing in a process currently dominated by the US and Russia. Finally, we must support those fleeing conflict. I therefore echo the calls for the Government finally to show some humanity and to reconsider their position on accepting unaccompanied refugee children from Europe.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman asks three questions. First, on restructuring, one of the reasons why we co-hosted—along with Kuwait, Germany, Norway and the United Nations—the important conference that took place in February was exactly to make sure that we could collect the necessary pledges from around the world. Over $11 billion, a record amount for any single day, was pledged to provide such support, most of which is going to the refugees, but there are also other initiatives.

The hon. Gentleman is right to point to the need for a political track, which I have already mentioned. It is not for us to determine that track. This is part of why the opposition coalition has come together, and it is exactly what the talks in Geneva are all about.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the 3,000 children. That issue has already been mentioned, and I apologise for not previously touching on it. We are doing our best
to help to stem the flow of refugees from the source itself. There is a huge question to be asked when EU member states, it is felt, cannot look after refugees and we are taking refugees from other EU member states. We have put in extra funding to make sure that, no matter where the refugees come to, they are looked after to absolutely the same standards. We do not want to add to the problem by encouraging more people, including children, to make the perilous journey along the various routes. As I say, the UK is helping to provide better support. Indeed, we are sending out teams to the various refugee camps to make sure that they have the necessary standards that we would expect if the refugees were in this country. I would add that we are honouring the Dublin convention, as hon. Members will be aware, which allows the transfer of children from other member states if they have a direct family connection in this country. I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees, who is sitting on the Front Bench, concurs.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): The news from Aleppo emphasises that Assad must not be part of the endgame in Syria. To what extent would my hon. Friend say that Russia has also come round to that view, and what more can be done to get Russia to re-in its ally, Assad?

Mr Ellwood: Those who are familiar, as I know my hon. Friend is, with the long-term historical relationship between Russia and Syria will be aware that this is an area of the world that Russia sees as its sphere of influence. Syria supported the Soviet Union during the cold war and Assad’s father trained as a MiG pilot in Russia. There are strong ties between the countries. I would advocate that Russia recognise that although it wants to keep its influence, it is not so wedded to Assad the individual. The political transition must move forward and the people of Syria must determine who their next leader will be.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Is it not clear that although Daesh is, of course, a murderous group run by outright murderers and psychopaths, the Syrian Government have for some time been carrying out crimes against humanity on a far greater scale—aided and abetted, moreover, by a member of the United Nations Security Council?

Mr Ellwood: I concur with the spirit of what the hon. Gentleman says. We took steps to hold Assad to account when he crossed a line by using chemical weapons. We wanted to take action, and we came to this House, but I am afraid that this House decided that that was not the action that was needed. We need to recognise that there are occasions when a few countries in the world can stand up to dictators such as Assad, and the rest of the world looks to countries such as Britain to act. We did not at that juncture.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): As the Minister has said, in particular in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), Russia is absolutely central to finding any kind of long-term solution in Syria. That is absolutely correct. Yet in all our attempts to talk to Russia we discover that there is an absolute brick wall between us.

Last week, members of the House of Commons Defence Committee were in Moscow, but the Russian Government would not speak to us. Lines of communication have broken down. Does the Minister agree that now may be the time to put aside, temporarily, our perfectly reasonable objection to and outrage at the illegal annexation of Crimea, and say to the Russians that we need to talk to them about Syria and that for now we should park our differences on other matters?

Mr Ellwood: I am aware that the Defence Committee made efforts to visit Moscow, which would have been an important visit—

Mr Gray: We were there last week.

Mr Ellwood: What I am trying to say is that what my hon. Friend has put his finger on, in tying the two issues together, is exactly what we should recognise. The sanctions against Putin are coming from the very countries to which the refugees are moving. We need to be a bit more astute in recognising that from Putin’s perspective the issue of Ukraine and the Crimea is linked with what is happening in Syria.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I am sure that the Minister is aware of the draft statement circulating among non-governmental organisations working in the Aleppo area, which says that there is a “complete absence of the fundamentals of safe humanitarian intervention, and the absence of a clear mechanism to monitor and document violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law”.

Is that the case, and can he tell us more?

Mr Ellwood: As the right hon. Lady is aware, getting access to Aleppo is very difficult indeed. We are collecting intelligence for the long term. She is right to highlight the complexities of this large city. The al-Nusra Front is based there, and Assad has taken advantage of the ceasefire to move weapons systems up to the area. That is why it is all the more important that we get Russia to exert its influence to make sure that Assad comes back to the table.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Surely we have to accept Syria as it is. Whether we like it or not, Assad is not going to go away in a hurry. He has the only army on the ground capable of defeating ISIL, and he has just as much support as all the hundred other warring factions. If we undermine him, an authoritarian, we will unleash worse totalitarian forces. Is it not significant that any progress this week has been as a result of contacts between America and Russia, yet our Government have put the Russian Government in complete deep freeze? We are denying them visas, we are not talking to Lavrov, we have absolutely no influence—because of our obsession with Russia and getting rid of Assad, we are not actually propelling peace forwards. We must drop the present policy and try to co-operate with the Americans so that Russia can get peace.

Mr Ellwood: I do not agree with what my hon. Friend has said, but I agree with the direction of travel he wants. Russia has influence over Assad. We are speaking with the Russians. John Kerry is in Geneva along with
Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. If Iran is to take a more responsible role on the international stage, following the nuclear deal, we expect it to act in a more honourable way, whether in Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad or Sana’a. We have not seen that to date. He is right to say that Hezbollah continues to play an important role, but we are also seeing a difference of opinion between what Iran is looking for and what Russia is after.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): When we hear at first hand from charities and NGOs that run hospitals in places such as Aleppo of those hospitals being bombed repeatedly by the regime and by Russian forces, the temptation is to come to this place and rage against the system, using those well-worn words, “Something must be done.” But in reality this is a most complex situation. What we want to hear—I think I heard the Minister allude to it this morning—is that everything is being done to work with the Russians to create a framework whereby safe areas and, if possible, air corridors for delivering aid can be secured. There must be a way of ensuring that it is humanitarian aid, even if that means having a Russian at Akrotiri to see what goes on the wretched plane that is delivering it.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend and I discussed these things over the weekend, and I know he has been following events closely. Indeed, he knows people working in the region. It is important we look for a longer-term solution around access to the humanitarian corridors. As I mentioned, the Foreign Secretary is speaking with John Kerry this afternoon, and I hope we will have more to report as time elapses.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I think I heard the Minister say in his reply that 49 children had been killed in recent hostilities. If I am correct, will he say what the Government are doing to make sure there is medical care for children in Aleppo?

Mr Ellwood: I am happy to confirm what I said before. According to human rights monitors, at least 253 civilians, including 49 children, have been killed in the city of Aleppo in the last fortnight alone. As I have said a couple of times now, the situation in Aleppo is fluid, because of the advances the Assad regime wants to make. Taking this most northern city, a key prize, has been a long-standing objective of the regime, and it would have a huge impact were the city to fall from the coalition.

It is important that we do what we can to provide access and make sure that areas such as hospitals are not bombed. We need to consider the case for giving grid references to make sure that such areas are protected and recognised, not least because a breach of the Geneva convention could be involved.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): My hon. Friend has twice said that in order to break the logjam we must have a political transition in relation to the Syrian Government. Will he enlighten the House as to what that means? Unpalatable as it might be, could it mean that Assad or some of his key Alawite officials have a role in a temporary transitional government?

Mr Ellwood: The concerns expressed about the 3,000 children are absolutely sincere. The solution, however, is not simply to remove the challenge from the area, but to solve the challenge in the area. We cannot endorse the idea that it is acceptable for other EU states not to meet the basic requirements for looking after refugees. By taking those refugees, we would simply be providing more space for further refugees to come in, and that is not a long-term solution.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister was diverted from the path of virtue by the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). No doubt the intentions were good, but we were straying somewhat from the terms of the UQ. As the Minister and others know, I have facilitated much discussion on the matter of refugees. I rather imagine that there will be more, and no doubt people will think, “And so there should be”, but it would be best today if we could stick to the terms of the UQ that the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) applied for and that I granted.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Minister quite rightly spoke about the influence of Russia, but what pressure is being put on Iran, which has equally supported the Assad regime, both directly and through proxies such as Hezbollah? Has the Foreign Office or the international community opened up that dialogue with Iran and, as part of the Iran deal, put pressure on it to make sure that it actually responds?
Mr Ellwood: When the Syrian International Support Group came together in Vienna for the first time, it discussed a process of transition to allow the various and diverse stakeholders across the country to determine the timetable. A timetable of 18 months to two years was put forward, but these things are always in the realms of speculation. I certainly hope that the Geneva talks, which is where these negotiations need to take place, will resume discussions on this issue.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Minister set out what the Secretary of State said in his representations to the Russians following the al-Quds hospital bombing, which was a gross violation of international humanitarian law? Did he ask them to tell Assad to stop, and what was the Russians’ response?

Mr Ellwood: I was not privy to the exact wording used. If I may, I will ask the Foreign Secretary, who arrives back this afternoon, to write to the right hon. Gentleman directly.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): More than five years of conflict is too long, and Members across the House will support the Government and the international community in their efforts to bring peace to this war-torn country. What progress are the Government making in shaping plans for post-conflict reconstruction in Syria?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It has been five years, but the difference over the last five or six months has been that negotiations have taken place and the stakeholders have been brought around the table. The international community, including Iran, Russia, the United States and France, as well as representatives from the EU and the UK, have all been around the table. That had not happened in the previous five years. The coalition and opposition groups have also come together. That is the major change on the previous five years. The London Syria conference was an important step in looking at the detail of what the international community must do, and be ready to do, once the guns eventually fall silent.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Together with the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray), I was in Moscow last week, and one of the things I found most difficult was that we had no shared understanding of history or of language and diplomacy. I therefore find it incredibly concerning that we are talking in vague words about how to bring Russia genuinely to the table for discussions—through proxies, if not by ourselves. May we have some more detail about what such a plan would be?

Mr Ellwood: I must have misunderstood, because I thought that the visit did not take place. I am pleased to know that the hon. Lady was able to make it to Moscow. I look forward to hearing any further reports she or the Committee might produce on what they learned from their discussions there. She is right to place the focus on the Minister’s assurance that the Government are committed to gathering evidence relating to crimes against humanity, but will he update us on what protection is being given to Christian communities and other refugees in the countries neighbouring Syria?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the plight of the Christians, not least in Mount Sinjar and then in other areas with the Yazidis. We saw devastating attacks by Daesh as they cleaned these areas out. We had a comprehensive debate on these matters only a couple of weeks ago. It is important for us to collect the evidence, which is what we are doing. I shall not name the NGOs involved; that would be wrong and place them in danger. We are carrying out a lot of work, however, to make sure that we can collect the necessary forensic and legal evidence, which will then allow us to make the case at the UN Security Council and take this matter forward.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): We all condemn the bombings of civilians in Aleppo, but what specific action is the UK taking, in conjunction with our European partners, to try to kick-start the peace process, which, as others have mentioned, is now seriously in the mire?

Mr Ellwood: I do not want to repeat myself, but the first thing is to get support for the humanitarian initiative that needs to take place in the area. We are the second-largest donor there. The Syria conference was critical in helping refugees—not just in Syria, but in Lebanon, Jordan and indeed Turkey, and I would like to pay tribute to those countries. This is critical. As we speak, talks are taking place behind the scenes to try to pressurise Russia and make sure that Lavrov and Putin recognise that they are best placed to allow humanitarian access and to prevent the bombing of the civilian areas.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I very much welcome the Minister’s statement. According to the BBC website, John Kerry has said that the Syrian conflict is now “out of control”. If that is the case, why is the Minister optimistic that the current talks will lead to a solution? Aleppo is the last stronghold of the opposition. If that falls, one may ask why the opposition should take part in any further discussions in Geneva.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is right to point out why the Syrian opposition pulled out from the talks. It is pointless sitting down for talks in Geneva when their own communities are being bombed back home. Although the situation has grown out of control and we have seen the cessation of hostilities break down, the whole purpose of John Kerry’s current initiative in speaking with Lavrov and working with our Secretary of State is to get ourselves back on course to ensure that the cessation of hostilities can be resumed. As I mentioned in my statement, we are seeing some signs that that is working.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The recent bombing of hospitals took place in a city that already has a severe shortage of doctors because of the events of the last three or four years. What can the Minister do
to ensure that any ceasefire has at its heart not only humanitarian aid, but the resumption of medical facilities to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe?

Mr Ellwood: In the sidelines of the London Syria conference, a number of major NGO workshops and meetings took place. A huge amount of effort has been put in by the Department for International Development Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Mr Swayne), who is in his place beside me, so that there is a readiness to move in. At the moment, however, the situation is just too dangerous for that to happen on a large scale.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Time is not on the side of the people of Aleppo. On Sunday night, the main and only road for those in the rebel-held east was bombed. If the regime manages to close that route, nearly 200,000 residents will be left trapped, without food or medical supplies. Pressure on Russia is key. I urge the Minister to do all he can to stress to Russia that time is running out.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend has made her point very powerfully. The very fact that we are having this debate means that we have another method of communicating with Russia and saying, “We care. We recognise what is going on. Russia, you need to do more, and currently you are not doing that.”

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is estimated that recent violence in Aleppo has led to the death of a Syrian every 25 minutes. There is grave humanitarian urgency. What progress are the Government making in negotiations on taking aid trucks into Aleppo? If no progress is made, will high-altitude airstrikes and air drops be reconsidered?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady has raised the important question of how we can best get aid into these vulnerable areas. That horrific statistic, of which I too am aware, highlights the challenge that we face. The international community must put more pressure on Russia, and must ensure that Assad is prohibited from bombing those areas so that we can get the aid in.

The best way to convey aid directly to where it needs to go is by truck, but the local checkpoints must give the trucks permission to go through in order for that to happen. Air drops can land anywhere. They often land in precisely the wrong hands, and are then used as a barter and as a means of worsening the situation, because the aid is denied to the people who need it.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): Our Sentinel aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles have provided a very complex and detailed picture of Syria from the air. Has evidence been gathered showing who the perpetrators of the attacks on civilians are? If there is such evidence, how is it being presented to the United Nations and to other nations?

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to my hon. and gallant Friend for his work during a previous campaign. He has

a huge amount of knowledge of what the Royal Air Force does, and he will therefore appreciate that the fact that his is an operational question prevents me from giving him a firm answer. However, if he would like to talk to me in the Lobbies, I shall be more than happy to have a quiet chat with him.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The bombing and shelling of civilian areas in Aleppo is sickening, and calls into serious question the Assad regime’s commitment to a peaceful resolution of the situation in Syria. So too, however, do the attempts to collude and trade with Daesh, as described by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson). What more is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office doing to bring together all sides, and to make it clear that action of this kind is compromising our efforts to secure a peaceful settlement in Syria?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman has articulated how complicated Syria is. However, that should not prevent us from playing our part in bringing Daesh to account, along with the international community. We are destroying Daesh on the battlefield, we are destroying their ideology, and we are destroying their ability to get their message out via the internet. We are also providing humanitarian aid and stabilisation capabilities in areas that have been liberated. The piece of the jigsaw that remains difficult is the political situation and the transition in Syria, and that is why it is so urgent for talks to resume in Geneva.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Along with the United Kingdom’s diplomatic efforts and the £2.3 billion worth of aid for the region, there have been reports of collusion between the Assad regime and Daesh in Syria. Can my right hon. Friend assure us that the British airstrikes are focused, and have not resulted in any civilian casualties?

Mr Ellwood: That is another operational question. I know that the rules of engagement that we adopt and with which we comply ensure that we try to avoid civilian casualties at all times, but, if I may, I will write to my hon. Friend giving him more details.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): What recent contact has been made with the peshmerga to discuss their role both in defeating Daesh and in building a stable and peaceful future throughout Syria?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman’s question gives me licence to pay tribute to the work of the peshmerga in liberating the Mosul dam, for example, and most of Kirkuk and the north of Iraq. It is important that they recognise the importance of working with the Iraqi army to improve the indigenous capability if we are to take Mosul and liberate Iraq from Daesh completely.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are most grateful to the Minister and to other colleagues.
Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust

4.25 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op)

Urgent Question: To ask the Secretary of State to make a statement on the safety of care and services provided by Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust.

The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) for her question. At the outset of my response, I want to express my deep concern and apologies to the patients and family members who will again have felt let down by the contents of last week’s report from the Care Quality Commission. Our first duty to patients and their loved ones is to keep them safe. This applies to all of us with a role to play in the NHS, from the frontline to this House, and the Government are therefore clear that it is imperative to be open and transparent about what has gone wrong in order to minimise the risk of similar failings occurring throughout the NHS as a whole. We must ensure that the trust itself continues to be scrutinised and supported to make rapid improvements in care. If that means intervention from the regulators, they will not hesitate to take the necessary action, and we will not hesitate to back them.

Last week’s CQC report followed a focused inspection announced and requested by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in December 2015. The report from the CQC set out a number of concerns, including: a lack of robust governance arrangements to investigate incidents; a lack of effective arrangements to identify, record or respond to concerns about patient safety; and a need for immediate action to address safety issues in the trust environment. The report also found that the senior management and board agendas were not driven by the need to address these issues. None of those matters is acceptable.

NHS Improvement has taken action in recent months to address the issues at the trust. It has been working closely with the CQC and the trust, and on 24 March, NHS Improvement appointed an improvement director to the trust. On 14 April, following a CQC warning notice on 6 April, NHS Improvement placed an additional condition on the trust’s licence, asking it to make urgent patient safety improvements to address the issues found by the CQC. That condition gave NHS Improvement the power to make management changes at the trust if it did not make progress on fixing the concerns raised.

On 29 April, following the resignation of the trust chair Mike Petter, NHS Improvement announced its intention to appoint Tim Smart as the chair of the trust. As chair, Mr Smart will have responsibility for looking at the adequacy of the trust’s leadership. Given the centrality of issues of governance to the CQC’s report, I welcome the action taken by NHS Improvement. The direct appointment of a new chair by a regulator is a relatively rare step, and it reflects the seriousness of the issues at the trust. NHS Improvement will continue to monitor the situation closely in the coming weeks and months.

I understand that the CQC is considering the trust’s response to its warning notice, and the risks it highlighted, before deciding whether to take any further enforcement action, and none of its options is closed. The notice required significant improvements to be made by 27 April.

Dr Paul Lelliott, the deputy chief inspector at the CQC, was directly responsible for the report, and I spoke to him this afternoon. He informs me that the delivery plan required by 27 April has been received and is in the process of being evaluated. NHS Improvement is working closely with the CQC and the trust, and the improvement director appointed by NHS Improvement is on site regularly, so there is constant independent oversight of the progress being made, as well as the formal monthly progress meetings between NHS Improvement and the trust.

In addition to the action we are taking on Southern Health, it is vital that we learn the wider lessons for the NHS as a whole. First, I hope the whole House can agree that it is right that we have robust, expert-led inspection from an independent CQC that provides an objective view about issues of safety and leadership, and that this is backed with action from NHS Improvement where that is required. Secondly, it is vital that we take the issue of avoidable mortality as seriously for people with learning disabilities and mental health problems as we do for other members of our society. To that end, the learning disability mortality review programme has been in place since 2008, and I have recently reaffirmed that the causes of this inequality are understood, and with the aim of eliminating them. In addition, the CQC will be leading a review of how all deaths are investigated, including those of people with learning disabilities or mental health needs. There can be no question but that the CQC report makes for disturbing reading, and that it demands action at local and national levels. We owe our most vulnerable people care that is safe and secure, and I am determined that we will do all we can to ensure patient safety.

Luciana Berger: I thank the Minister for very brief advance sight of his response. Patients and parents have a right to be angry at the failure of Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust, and we in this House have a duty to be angry on their behalf. To read the litany of failure, missed warnings, reports and recommendations ignored, and secrecy over the last four years would make any reasonable person angry, too. Friday’s CQC report shows that very little has been done since the House last discussed the matter in December.

The scandal at Southern Health has happened on this Government’s watch, and Ministers must take responsibility for what has happened to some of the most vulnerable people in our country. We should be angry that Connor Sparrowhawk was left to drown in a bath. We should be angry that Angela Smith took her own life. We should be angry that David West died in the care of this NHS trust—his father was repeatedly ignored when he raised his concerns. All of them were denied the care that they so desperately needed. Last week, the BBC reported that over the past five years, 12 patients who had been detained for their safety or that of others have jumped off the roof of a hospital run by this trust. Access to a roof was still permitted to people at risk of suicide. If all those tragic incidents were the only signs of systemic failure, we should be angry, but there is a much bigger story of neglect and malpractice, which aggregates into a major scandal.

When the Secretary of State responded to the urgent question on Southern Health in December, he rightly said:

“More than anything”
people will “want to know that the NHS learns from” such “tragedies”. —[Official Report, 10 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 1141.]

The CQC report published on Friday shows that that clearly has not happened. So I ask the Minister: first, what guarantees can the Minister give to the 45,000 patients currently in the care of Southern Health, and their families, that they are safe? Secondly, where is the accountability, the culpability and the responsibility? There seems to be very little. I heard what he said about the chair, but does he agree that the chief executive’s position is now untenable, and that she should be sacked? Thirdly, will he listen to the heartfelt pleas of the victims’ families, the campaigners, and all of us who are demanding a full public inquiry into Southern Health and broader issues, such as the abject failure adequately to investigate preventable deaths?

As the Secretary of State said in December, such issues are not confined to one trust. The Ofsted-style ratings that he previously mentioned will make a difference only if there is proper accountability and the ability to take action to make real improvements to patient care and patient safety. The families have behaved with such dignity and tenacity, and we owe them a debt of gratitude, but it should not be left to them alone to push for accountability.

I listened carefully to what the Minister told the House, but I remain unconvinced that enough has changed. Four months ago, we heard similar reassurances. The time for yet more warm words and hollow reassurances is over. We need action, and we need it now.

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady for her response. We are not actually debating the Government’s failure to respond at all. The Secretary of State did exactly what he said he was going to do, and the CQC’s inquiry and work that followed can be seen in the report that was produced last week. The report contains a number of further concerns—there is no doubt about that—and people are right to be angry, but there is a process to find out what is going on and to do something about it and that process is in place. That is what NHS Improvement is doing and it is important that that is done.

There is an issue of urgency, which is really important. There are things that are discovered and things take time to get done. I am not content with that in any way, but the process is in place to do something about that. The CQC has been engaged and has ruled out no option for further action. Its options are quite extensive, including prosecution for things that it has found. The process started by the Secretary of State is not yet finished. That my right hon. Friend has demonstrated his commitment to patient safety from the moment he walked into that office cannot be denied by anyone, and this is a further part to that.

I asked the same question that the hon. Lady asked about safety directly to the CQC this afternoon, and I spoke to Dr Paul Lelliott who compiled the report. I asked whether people are safe at the foundation trust today. People are safe because, as we know, the CQC has powers to shut down places immediately if there is a risk to patients. It has not done so, but I am persuaded that if it had found such a risk it would have closed things down. There is therefore no risk to safety in the terms that the hon. Lady suggests.

On the chief executive’s position, the power to deal with management change is held by NHS Improvement. I also offer a brief word of caution. There is a track record of Ministers speaking out, at great cost, about the removal of people in positions over which they have no authority. That is understandable in situations of great concern when an angry response seems right, but it is not an appropriate response. The chair has gone, and processes are available should any more management changes be necessary, which is important. Colleagues in the House can say whatever they like, but a Minister cannot and must say that appropriate processes can be followed, because that is right and proper.

I do not yet know about an inquiry, and I want to wait and see what comes out of the further work being done in the trust. I do not rule out some form of further inquiry, but an inquiry is physically being carried out now by the actions taking place on the ground. What needs to follow is urgent action to respond to what the CQC has said, and a long drawn-out public inquiry is not necessarily the right answer. More work might be necessary, but I need to consider that in relation to further work being done at the trust.

On preventable deaths, as I made clear in my statement, I am sure that not enough attention has been given to those cases that require further investigation across the system, often dating back many years and preceding this Government. We have turned our attention to that issue, and we will make changes because such inequality must end.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The report on Southern Health makes disturbing reading, but we will never tackle unacceptable levels of health inequality and early deaths among those who live with learning disability and mental health issues unless we address safety and risk. Will the Minister go further on the mortality review and set out how we can see where differences exist around the country? Will he reassure the House that duty of candour will in future be more than a tick in the box?

Alistair Burt: A tick in the box for duty of candour, which the report mentioned, was unacceptable—it must mean much more than that. The learning disability mortality review programme is important and will support local areas to review the deaths of people with learning disabilities, and use that information to help improve services. In time, it will also show at a national level whether things are improving for people with learning disabilities, and whether fewer people are dying from preventable causes. That review is already under way in a pilot in the north-east in Cumbria, which will help to inform us how the programme operates as it is rolled out. Plans are in place to roll out that review across all regions of England between now and 2018, with pilots commencing in other parts of the country between 2016 and 2017. That work has never been done before, and it is right that we are doing it now.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): As the Minister and other hon. Members have said, Friday’s report makes grim reading for the many families and patients. It is right to pay tribute to the campaign that was run by people in the care of Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust. The Minister said that those failings are not isolated to that trust, but are on a much wider scale. In light of that, is he seriously considering a public inquiry
that will get to the heart of the underlying factors in those matters? Patients and families who use this trust—some of whom are my constituents—must be reassured that those underlying issues are being properly considered and not brushed under the carpet.

**Alistair Burt:** It is vital that they are not brushed under the carpet, and I will come to that in a second. It is important to put it on the record that there are some positive aspects of this report, some of which relate to Southampton. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will already have seen those, with the trust being commended for its work on the community pathway. On the substance of his question, I spoke honestly a moment ago when I said that I really do not know at this stage whether an inquiry is the right thing to do. I am well aware of the seriousness of this matter, of the questions the families have raised, and of the fact that this has been going on for some time. The important thing is both to effect change and to find out what has happened. The CQC report—the extensive work that has already been done—is in depth, public and transparent. That may well have the answers that are required, but if not, something further may be needed, which is why I have an open mind on this. The most important thing is to give the reassurance that certain things have happened, which the CQC report cannot yet do because that is where the work is needed and where the work is going on now.

**Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con):** Our constituents, particularly those with learning disabilities, need to have confidence in the complex set of services provided by Southern Health. The failings that have been identified are completely unacceptable and disturbing, and I welcome the Minister’s statement and the CQC’s action with the warning notice it has issued. Will he join me in paying tribute to the dedicated staff at Southern Health facilities that are not implicated in these serious problems, including Parklands hospital in my constituency, which provides acute wards for adults needing intensive psychiatric care, in a much needed facility that has very dedicated staff running it?

**Alistair Burt:** Absolutely. When I got the report over the weekend and turned to the summary of findings, I saw that the first positive summary finding was: “Staff were kind, caring, and supportive and treated patients with respect and dignity. Patients reported that some staff went the ‘extra mile’.” It is important to put that on the record; it does not minimise the things that are wrong, but in a trust that is so large, covering such a wide area and so many people, it is important that that good work is recognised, and that errors and faults of management and governance should not be laid at their door. I pay tribute to those staff, who work in incredibly difficult circumstances.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** I just note in passing that four Members on the Opposition Benches are standing and none of them have the area covered by the trust. That does not preclude a question, but I should just make the point that the question must be about this trust and this set of circumstances, rather than, as is commonly deployed in this House, “and elsewhere”. It is just about this matter, in this situation, covered by this trust—a matter that will be approached with great dexterity, I am sure, by Ann Clwyd.

**Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab):** I will attempt that, Mr Speaker. I just want to ask the following: how long does it take to effect change? Some 45 years ago, the Ely hospital inquiry took place, under the chairmanship of Geoffrey Howe, and recommendations were made. I took part, writing a report on the condition of mental health facilities throughout Wales. We are talking about some 45 years here, and it seems to me that things are going at such a slow pace that we will be asking the same question again in 45 years’ time.

**Alistair Burt:** The frustration in the NHS is that although what the right hon. Lady says is not true in some places, it is in others; the special measures process in effect at the moment has effected change and has done so more quickly. There are other places where that does not happen. I am concerned that in mental health the sense of defensiveness which we know has characterised parts of the NHS for too long has probably had too great a grip, and we have not always got things done more quickly or demanded that things are done with the degree of urgency that we would expect, on behalf of constituents. I am very determined that any difficulties in getting things done locally in trusts when they need to be done will not be aided or abetted by any lack of urgency in the Department or the upper reaches of the NHS with which we have contact. The concern to make sure that urgency is there is rightfully expressed by the House, and we have to see that that is delivered.

**Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con):** In 2011 and 2012, I was locked in a bitter confrontation with Southern Health Foundation Trust over the determination of its top management to close no fewer than 88 out of its 165 acute in-patient beds for people suffering from mental health illnesses and breakdowns. It is the only constituency issue over which I have ever suffered sleepless nights, and I failed to stop the trust closing the Winsor ward in the relatively new Woodhaven hospital in my constituency. Today, apart from this terrible issue about the deaths, the system remains overfull, the beds remain too few and I understand that at least 80% of the in-patients are people who have been sectioned, leaving people a very low chance of getting an elective bed from Southern Health unless they are prepared to wait a long time. Can the CQC look into this wider issue, given that it has so many other serious concerns about the trust?

**Alistair Burt:** The CQC’s powers are extensive and I know that it will absolutely know what my right hon. Friend says. The debate comparing the provision of beds for treatment with community treatment has been going on for some time in mental health, and different pathways are taken by different trusts. Some trusts put more people into beds, while others are doing more in the community. The general sense is that more should be available in the community, but that must not preclude the availability of emergency beds when they are needed. I will ensure that the CQC is aware of my right hon. Friend’s concerns about that particular trust.
Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Are the failures at Southern Health a symptom of the growing and unsustainable pressure being placed on the mental health and learning disability services? In the context of increased demand, significant pressure on beds, higher thresholds for care, staffing cuts and shortages, how can the Minister guarantee that mental health and learning disability trusts are able to do their jobs?

Alistair Burt: Let me point out that we have announced an increased resource for mental health of £11.7 billion. The extra £1 billion that the Mental Health Taskforce recommended being spent by 2020 will be spent, and it will be spent right across the board from perinatal mental health to crisis care. It will also improve baselines to ensure that the governance and quality of foundation trusts are good enough, and we are watching what CQCs are spending. Yes, we recognise that there has been historical underfunding from Governments of all characters, but we are determined to improve it and the money is there.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): All too often it is our constituents with mental health problems and learning difficulties who find it hardest to get their voices heard. Those who are patients of Southern Health are not in a position to call for urgent change. I note that the Minister has said that the delivery plan is being evaluated, but can he reassure us that that is being done with the utmost speed so that we see improvements on the ground and not just more reports gathering dust?

Alistair Burt: Today, I met departmental officials and spoke to the regional director responsible for NHS improvement and, as I mentioned earlier, the deputy chief inspector of the CQC who is responsible for this report. I can assure my hon. Friend that, in so far as it is up to me or the Department, that change will be adequately delivered with a sense of urgency, because, as she rightly says, patients and families have, in some cases, waited much too long for this. If warm words are to mean anything, we must show that delivery follows.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): The failure of care for people with mental health issues, learning disabilities and autism has been shocking and the board should go. Equally shocking is the fact that, 11 months before Connor Sparrowhawk’s tragic and unnecessary death, failures had been identified but not acted on. What can the Minister do to ensure that, as part of a robust inspection regime, when failures are identified they are acted on and done so very quickly to prevent such failures again?

Alistair Burt: Over the past 12 months I have met a number of families who have been victims in similar circumstances—some had children who had been placed badly in an inappropriate place, and, in one or two cases, death had been the result. My colleagues and I are determined to do whatever we can to break down those situations where people feel that they have to fight for everything, and where they find doors closed against them when they want to challenge something. All too often in mental health, when people are challenged, they respond defensively. The whole transforming care process stems from Winterbourne View and the determination of the NHS and the board that monitors and oversees that process, including those who have mental health issues themselves and their advocates. The concerns that have been expressed in the past will not go completely, but I am sure the system is better placed now to deal with them and to listen to people more seriously than was the case, tragically, in the past.

Suella Fernandes ( Fareham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the resignation of the chairman is a measure of the seriousness of the issue, and that after two damning reports, serious changes in the leadership are needed? What reassurance can he provide to my constituents in Fareham, such as the family of David West, that the regulatory bodies have the powers necessary if intervention is required?

Alistair Burt: I know that my hon. Friend has followed these matters closely for her constituents. Since last year there have been nine changes to the board, and the chair of the board left last weekend. NHS Improvement has the powers to alter governance, and I know from speaking to NHS Improvement that it take that power and responsibility extremely seriously. The balance is between ensuring continuity and stability so that what the trust has promised is delivered, and wholesale change, which would provide an opportunity for further delay and prevent the work going on, but I know that NHS Improvement is very aware of its responsibilities in relation to governance, as I hope is the trust itself.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is right that this House legislated for parity of esteem for mental health care; I am proud that we did that. I recognise the Minister’s commitment to quick resolution so that we can implement recommendations to address the failings of the trust. Will he consider an independent inquiry similar to the first independent inquiry into Mid Staffs that my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) initiated in 2010?

Alistair Burt: I can do nothing more than repeat what I said earlier. I am aware that there might be circumstances in which an inquiry would bring out more and would demonstrate the degree of concern that colleagues in the House might find appropriate and that the families and others would understand. My first duty is to make sure that everyone is safe in the trust and to ensure the completion of the work that needs to be done to deliver what the CQC has found. Even after this very thorough work by CQC, which is transparent—that is why we are talking about it today—if anything further is needed, I will give it genuine and serious consideration.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): The Minister is right to call the report disturbing. It has caused alarm and uncertainty across my constituency, and it is with the uncertainty that I hope he can help. In common with other Members, I am keen to know whether he has a hard date by which the trust is to be reviewed again. If it were to fail that hurdle, what would the next action be—revocation of the licence or further improvements? He will understand that most of my constituents want to see a deadline for compliance, and after that significant change that might mean a new era at Southern Health.
Alistair Burt: The best way that I can convey it is to say that constant monitoring is being done. First, the improvement director, who was appointed not by the trust, but by NHS Improvement, is there. In due course he will have a constant presence, but the monitoring needs to be done on a very regular basis. Also, the CQC has made it clear that should there be any need for further unannounced inspections, it will carry them out, so the trust is on constant notice that there can be a further inspection at any time. Further powers of the CQC include issuing another warning notice, varying and removing conditions of registration, monetary penalty notice for prescribed offences, suspending registration, and prosecution. I understand from speaking to Mr Paul Lelliott that none of these measures has been ruled out.

Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It is that very point I wish to talk about. The duty of candour was going to give us so much more strength, but it is not being applied as yet. It is a statutory duty, placed on people carrying out regulated activities. It can lead to prosecution by the CQC, including without a warning notice. Will the Minister assure me that he will watch carefully to make sure that the CQC uses those powers appropriately? If it does not, we are once again failing these very vulnerable people.

Alistair Burt: Absolutely. If we now have a system where there is, quite rightly, a degree of autonomy, and Ministers’ responsibility is to make sure that the process and the system work well, Ministers cannot make all the decisions personally, but we do have to make sure that decisions that need to be taken are taken and, if not, that there is a good explanation of why not.

The CQC’s powers have been strengthened. Just a few months ago, we had the first case of a care home owner being jailed because of the care given to people in their home. While I recognise that the work done in caring for vulnerable people is complex and difficult, and that prosecution will not be the right answer in every case, knowing that powers are there is really important. The hon. Lady’s anger is appropriate, and I know the CQC takes these powers very seriously.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does the NHS improvement director now have the power to go into any Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust facility to assess and neutralise threats we have learned about that have resulted in people dying?

Alistair Burt: I hope my hon. Friend will forgive me, but I will not say things from the Dispatch Box that I do not know, and I do not know the precise powers of the improvement director, although I know the CQC has exactly the powers my hon. Friend suggests. However, the purpose of appointing the improvement director, and indeed of NHS Improvement’s appointment of the new chair, Tim Smart—the former chief executive of King’s College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust—is to put in place people who know what they are doing, know what they are looking for and can authorise others to make sure that nothing is being covered up and that everything is transparent.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): In this sorry saga, what assurances can the Minister give about current levels of care and safety to the families of patients with learning disabilities who are in the care of Southern Health?

Alistair Burt: I think the best thing, genuinely, is to refer to the CQC report. It highlights good practice and good work in relation to staff in a variety of places and community pathways and in relation to work being done for those with learning disabilities. This is a large trust, covering many areas and many different facilities, and it would be quite wrong to assume that the standard of care is uniform across the board in terms of the criticisms that have been made. The criticisms are very real and very strong, but the work done by individual members of staff caring for people is reported by the CQC to be good. Again, in terms of safety, I am reassured that the CQC has powers and that it has assured me that, if it needed to use those powers in relation to safety and risk to patients, it would do so.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Minister and other colleagues who have taken part in these exchanges. I content myself simply with the observation that they have been a very important treatment of a very important subject. Perhaps, on behalf of the House, I can express the hope that the Hansard text of these exchanges will be supplied to Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust. It needs to know that we have treated of it and what has been said—politely and with notable restraint, but with very real anxiety—in all parts of the House about the situation within its aegis. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]
Points of Order

4.39 pm

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last week there were a couple of understandable occasions when people in the Chamber—Members of Parliament—broke into applause. This can be quite awkward for some of us—Conservative Members and Opposition Members—who know about the conventions of the House, because we feel unable to join in the applause. Could you give guidance about what is the current practice? If you uphold the tradition that we do not have applause—although I do not wish to pre-empt your view on this—could you let it be known more generally to Members of the House of Commons whether we should break into applause; or not, on occasion?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and his great courtesy in raising it in the way that he did. The short answer is that it is the long-established convention of this House that we do not applaud. For what it is worth, to the best of my recollection, I have never myself done so. If he is asking me whether I would prefer it to remain that way, the short answer is that I would. I think that the convention that we do not applaud but register our approval in other ways is a valuable one. All I would say to the hon. Gentleman, who has raised his point in an extremely polite way, is that as far as the Chair is concerned, each situation has to be judged on its merits. I am very conscious that I am the servant of the House. If, spontaneously, a large group of Members bursts into applause, sometimes the most prudent approach is to let it take its course. However, I would much prefer it if it did not happen, unless the House consciously wills a change, and I am not aware that the House as a whole has done so. In that respect, I sense that the hon. Gentleman and I, not for the first time and hopefully not for the last, are on the same side.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. In fairness to the Members, usually newer Members, who occasionally do this, it is worth pointing out that it usually tends to happen on a particular, spontaneous, unusual occasion, and not routinely. If it did happen routinely, we would end up with organised cheering of the sort that we sometimes get on the more downmarket versions of talent shows on TV. That would not be the direction in which we would want to go.

Mr Speaker: That would be thoroughly undesirable. The more unusual, or even occasional, the better. For it to become the norm would, I think, be deprecated by the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), deprecated by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), and deprecated by the Chair. The hon. Member for Lichfield asked me to find a way of communicating more widely my view on this matter, and I hope I have just taken that opportunity. There is no slight directed at any individual, nor any adverse comment on any particular occasion, but usually our traditions are for a reason, and to find that we elide or morph into a new situation as a result of inactivity or happenstance is undesirable. If the House wants consciously to change things, then let it, but as far as I am concerned it has not yet done so. I hope that is helpful.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You may be aware of a report published over the weekend by Citizens Advice indicating a 25% increase in the number of people coming forward with problems relating to pregnancy and maternity discrimination. This follows hot on the heels of a report shortly before the Easter recess from the Equality and Human Rights Commission indicating that three quarters of women have had negative experiences of work associated with pregnancy or maternity. I am very pleased to see the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who chairs the Women and Equalities Committee, in the Chamber, because her Committee is conducting an important piece of research into this, and an inquiry. However, there has been no comment at all from Government Ministers and so far no indication that time will be made available in the Chamber to debate this important subject. Can you tell me, Mr Speaker, if Ministers have approached you indicating their intention to make a statement on the Citizens Advice report or on the EHRC report, with which the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills was associated?

Mr Speaker: The answer to that is no. As far as I am aware, I have not been approached, certainly not directly, and I am not conscious of any document or missive circulating in my office on this matter. It occurs to me that Work and Pensions questions take place on Monday next week. That is by no means the only, or even necessarily the best, opportunity to raise the matter, but it is one such opportunity. If that does not suit the hon. Lady or other opportunities are sought, they may materialise. As far as the House as an employer is concerned, I am not aware that there is a problem, and I would be very concerned if there were. We must take steps to keep ourselves informed to satisfy ourselves that best practice, as well as the law, is followed.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You might have seen recent press reports that a police unit tasked with spying on alleged extremists intent on committing serious crimes has been wasting its time and, indeed, taxpayers’ money monitoring members of the Green party, including myself. Could you give me advice, Mr Speaker, on the best way to raise the matter so that we can get the Home Secretary to make a statement on the House on the methods of surveillance; the legal power supposedly used in order to justify that surveillance; and, most importantly, why citizens lawfully engaging in legitimate political activity have been targeted by the police in this way?

Mr Speaker: This is a rather disturbing matter. I do not know whether the hon. Lady is suggesting that there is any interference with her work as a Member of Parliament. If that were so, that would be an exceptionally serious matter, but it would be effectively a matter of privilege, about which, in conformity with convention, she should write to me and it would then be taken forward as appropriate.

Beyond that, I can only say that the matter in question is not one for me. It does sound, very bizarre situation. I find it very curious to think that the hon. Lady is being, or might be, subject to some sort of surveillance in relation to her activities as a Member of Parliament. I am not aware of that. I think that I have to advise her
that she must find other means by which to air her concerns. If she will not take it amiss, I will simply say that, knowing both her intelligence and her indefatigability, there is no way that finding other means to air her concern will be beyond her very considerable capabilities. Perhaps we can leave it there for today, but if she needs to come back about the matter, which is potentially very serious, she should do so.

If there are no further points of order, we come now to the ten-minute rule motion—a further opportunity for a display of the intelligence and indefatigability of Caroline Lucas.

5.7 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish an independent commission of inquiry to examine ways of improving parliamentary and other public scrutiny of ministerial mandates and outcomes in relation to European Union institutions, policies and legislation; and for connected purposes.

In 50 days, this country will go to the polls to take the most important single decision of a generation, namely that of whether to remain in the EU or to leave. I am strongly in favour of staying in, and I will continue to make the case that we are stronger in, greener in and fairer in. In today's globalised world, we can achieve so much more by working together with our closest neighbours than we can by going it alone.

I make this speech not as a lover of everything about the EU. Indeed, I understand it when some constituents ask, “Why stay part of an institution that has faults?” or, “Why spend time reforming the EU when we could leave it instead?” Many concerns about the EU and how it operates are valid—as, indeed, are concerns about how Westminster operates—but they are not a reason to walk away.

Moreover, such concerns are often exploited by populist political opportunists with toxic xenophobic messages. Outright fearmongering about foreigners is again rearing its ugly head across the continent. What worries me most about the rise of this divisive politics is that it erases from history the series of events that led to the formation of the EU, and it is also remarkably complacent about the future.

The EU is not an abstract project born of idle philosophising in continental think-tanks. The imperative to share sovereignty in Europe and to ensure that economic competition does not again spill over into conflict was built on the blood and bones of the Europeans killed in the terrible first half of the 20th century. The EU is a pragmatic response to our failure to manage the forces of nationalism and industrialisation, and I would argue that it has done much to reduce the aggressive ambitions of European elites who have disputed control of the continent for centuries. For me, one of the foremost reasons for staying in the EU is that it makes peace more likely. We cannot wish away the EU's problems, however, and nor can we simply urge people to love it because of its history of peace making. Instead, we must be bold in reforming how the EU works and making sure that our constituents have more of a say over what happens at EU level.

Data suggest that British people are among the least knowledgeable about the EU. That is not their fault, but it highlights the urgent need to ensure that the public are able to be more engaged with EU policy and legislation. The fundamental point is that there are dozens of things that can be done unilaterally here in the UK to improve the accountability for, and engagement with, EU decision making, and that is what my Bill is about.
After 10 years working as an MEP in the European Parliament, I am in no doubt that the EU needs far-reaching reform. One major set of reforms could happen tomorrow, because implementation is entirely in the gift of the UK Government. No agreement or even discussion with other EU countries is required, and those reforms are the subject of my Bill. They build on proposals from the Electoral Reform Society, the Hansard Society, the House of Lords European Union Committee and the Commons European Scrutiny Committee, which have already done much important work in this area.

One of the proposals is that the UK Parliament should engage with the Government’s negotiating position before European Council meetings as well as after—that practice is routine in many member states. We need a more effective model of scrutiny to allow Parliament to hold the Government fully to account regarding its dealings with other European states. The Hansard Society has pointed to the fact that our system is largely one of document-based scrutiny that takes place only once policy is decided. We could easily improve the scrutiny of Ministers at monthly departmental oral questions—including topical questions—by setting aside specific time for the coverage of European issues related to their policy areas.

Our Select Committee system should also provide a high-profile powerhouse for scrutinising EU policies. To make that happen, the European Scrutiny Committee should not just be reactive: it should have the capacity proactively to choose what to follow up, in the same way as a departmental Select Committee. We need to raise the profile of the House’s three European Committees, which cover particular Departments. I have much sympathy with the suggestion that the membership of those committees should be made permanent so that experience and expertise can be built up.

The Electoral Reform Society points out that the House of Lords is considered to provide exemplary scrutiny of the EU, with six Sub-Committees covering various aspects of EU policy, as well as the stand-alone European Union Committee. It is an irony that the part of the British Parliament that provides the greatest scrutiny of the EU is the part that is both unelected and unaccountable, and it is time for that to change.

Credit should be given to the European Scrutiny Committee, which has for some time been reviewing its links with departmental Select Committees. For example, it has examined the role of an informal network of EU contact points on each Select Committee team, as happens in the Scottish Parliament. The European Scrutiny Committee can require our Select Committees to develop and provide an opinion on a particular document. However, Commons Select Committees often do not look at legislation, and they do not have the capacity to do so, which means that coverage of European Union matters may be patchy and inconsistent.

The commission of inquiry provided for in the Bill would examine the very strong case for expanding the Commons Select Committee system so that it could proactively scrutinise EU proposals and legislation. I recognise that in order to manage the workload, some kind of Sub-Committee process would be needed, and the whole system would need to be properly resourced, but putting that in place could make a real difference to scrutiny and accountability. We also need better mechanisms to give devolved Parliaments and Assemblies the ability to hold UK Ministers to account on EU negotiations, and devolved Ministers should have the right to participate in European Council meetings. Those are just some examples of changes the UK could unilaterally make to improve accountability and our scrutiny of EU decision making. Indeed, a House of Lords EU Committee report in 2015 identified no fewer than 35 such measures.

Under the Bill, we should also consider reforms that UK Ministers could champion at an EU level. The same House of Lords Committee report has repeated its previous call for a formally recognised green card system. At present, that is just an informal mechanism that is intended to enable the Parliaments of EU member states to join forces to make proposals to the European Commission to initiate EU policy and legislation. The first green card, on food waste, was proposed by the House of Lords and submitted to the Commission last year. This is an important means of strengthening national Parliaments’ ability to take joint action proactively to make proposals, not just to react to them, and of revitalising our democracy in Europe. It also means strengthening the role and work of the offices of national Parliaments in Brussels so that we can enhance parliamentary co-operation among member states on a wide range of issues.

The European Commission is one of the less democratic parts of the EU and we urgently need better ways to hold our European Commissioners to account. The 28 European Commissioners appointed by Governments act almost as a Cabinet, with each Commissioner being responsible for a certain brief. The Commission is too powerful—it proposes EU legislation, manages and implements EU budgets and policies, and enforces EU decisions—yet the channels of representation are byzantine, and there is a serious lack of transparency about how we select our Commissioners. The significant gap between the European Commission and the people obscures channels of accountability, but we can do something about that. The remit of the commission proposed by my Bill should include an assessment of what mechanisms we could use in the UK better to hold our EU Commissioner to account, and to allow for transparency in and scrutiny of their role. In that way, we could begin to remedy the situation in which most voters neither know nor care who our European Commissioners are or what they stand for.

We need new mechanisms to ensure that Parliaments can undertake a more proactive role. It is unacceptably and unnecessarily difficult to follow what our Ministers are doing on our behalf in the EU, let alone for parliamentarians and the public to have meaningful input to shape it. That is a big part of the perceived democratic deficit associated with EU decision making. There is so much that we could and should do, unilaterally in the UK, to make that better, and there are actions that we can take at EU level.

Of course, much bigger reforms are needed, such as with regard to the relative powers of the European Parliament and the European Commission, but the Bill’s purpose is to identify the measures that we can take here and now in the UK, if there is sufficient political will. We already have powers to make the EU more democratic and accountable, if we choose to take them, and there are clear steps we could and should take in this House. I hope that, on 24 June, the UK not only will have voted to remain part of the EU, but will grasp the opportunity to reform our continued participation,
and that we in this House will create a positive gateway to a new and revised strand of vital political transparency, participation and accountability. The reforms I have outlined will not, in themselves, save the EU from a crisis of accountability, but they will make a big difference and will certainly help.

5.18 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We are a week from Parliament being prorogued prior to the Queen’s Speech. If we entered some kind of green dreamland, with the Opposition and the Government agreeing to accept the Bill and it becoming law—of course, we all know that that is not going to happen—do you know what I think would be the result, Mr Deputy Speaker? I think the effect on the European Union would be “nul points”—absolute zero.

We could have as many Select Committees as we like. My hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) has spent a lifetime on Select Committees scrutinising the European Union. It is true that we already summon the Prime Minister to our Chamber after European Council meetings and he spends two hours answering our questions, but how much difference does that make? We could also summon him to appear before such meetings. We could do all the things that the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) wants—and nothing would change.

What is the structure of the European Union? It is a unique construct in terms of democracy and world history. We have a Parliament representing the people of the EU that has no ability to initiate legislation, which can be initiated only by an accountable bureaucracy—the Commission. In what Parliament or nation is that replicated?

What of the Council of Ministers? I have served, with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), on the Council. Were we—or is it now—concerned overtly about what was being discussed by deputies in the various national Parliaments? No. It is all done by making deals through the night.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Is not the Bill simply putting a colourful and pretty ribbon on the tail of a very hungry tiger, the EU, that will go on eating up our powers, taking our taxes and forcing up taxes on green products?

Sir Edward Leigh: Absolutely. There is one way in which we can genuinely reform the EU. The Prime Minister tells us that we should remain in a reformed EU. Is there a single hon. Member on either side of this argument, or on either side of the House, who believes that the Prime Minister has reformed the EU? Despite his best efforts, no one believes that. Everyone knows that the negotiation was, to all intents and purposes, a sham to enable him to come back to the British people and try to convince them that this unformed and unrefromable body had indeed been reformed. Everyone in Europe knows that it is unrefromed and unrefromable, because of the very structure that I have talked about.

The fundamental problem is that we can have as many Select Committees as we like, and summon Ministers here as often as possible, but this Parliament is not supreme. That was the fundamental dilemma that our predecessors, the Labour Government in 1948 and the Conservative Government in 1957, were faced with. They were very happy to try to create European free trade—more free trade in iron and steel in 1948, and more free trade in 1957—but it was made clear to them by Mr Schuman, Mr Monnet and others that this was a project that would inevitably lead to federation. That is what it is about—it is, in the terms of the book by Hugo Young, this blessed plot. The people of Europe are not being consulted. The European construct is designed to ensure that the deals and the progress towards European federation are made in secret. When I was Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, we went to the European Court of Auditors. The accounts have never been signed off. The EU is a body riddled not only with waste and incompetence, but with corruption.

Even if the Bill were to become law, it would achieve nothing, but there is one way in which we can achieve something. I simply pose a question: if one of the most important countries in the European Union were to vote to leave it, what would happen? We would not be talking about some little ten-minute rule Bill that would be ignored by the rest of the European Union, even if it became law. Do we not think that there would be a most profound electric shock through the whole system? Do we not think that our leaders in Europe might then sit down for a moment, ponder the fate of their construct and say that it should be designed to achieve what the European peoples want, which is peace and friendship?

Peace and friendship have, fundamentally, been created by NATO—at this point, I commend to Members an excellent article by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) making that precise point. NATO is a construct that we can indeed emulate because it is not a supranational body. It is a treaty-based body, but it does not impose its laws or supremacy on the peoples of Europe.

What the peoples of Europe want is what our own people really want: free trade. If we were to take this historic opportunity in June, I do not think for a moment that the world would fall in—it is moving towards European free trade. The very worst thing that could happen would be that we would have most favoured nation status and would have to pay tariffs of 5% on most of our exports to the European Union, but that is not going to happen anyway, because there is a massive balance of trade surplus against us. A deal can be constructed, based on free trade.

Much more important than what we think or want, however, is what might be created in the rest of Europe: a Europe of nation states; a Europe that was the original vision of General de Gaulle; a Europe where national Parliaments have genuine powers, and a genuine veto; a genuinely democratic Europe. That is our challenge, and there are millions of people in this country who will seize that challenge and vote for freedom in the referendum in June.

Question put (Standing Order No. 23) and agreed to. Ordered.

That Caroline Lucas, Mr Pat McFadden, Tim Farron, Mr Graham Allen, Stephen Gethins, Stephen Kinnock, Hywel Williams, Greg Mulholland and Ms Margaret Ritchie present the Bill.

Caroline Lucas accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 May, and to be printed (Bill 171).
HOUSING AND PLANNING BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

Resolved,
That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Housing and Planning Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—[Brandon Lewis.]

HOUSING AND PLANNING BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),
That the following provisions shall apply to the Housing and Planning Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 2 November 2015 (Housing and Planning Bill (Programme)) and 5 January 2016 (Housing and Planning Bill (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments
(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to an end at the moment of interruption.
(2) The proceedings shall be taken in the order shown in the first column of the following Table.
(3) The proceedings shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the times specified in the second column of the Table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lords Amendments</th>
<th>Time for conclusion of proceedings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nos. 1, 9, 10, 37, 184, 47, 54, 55, 57, 58, 2 to 8, 11 to 36, 38 to 46, 48 to 53, 56, 59 to 96, 182, 183, 185 to 188, 190, 191 and 195 to 239</td>
<td>Three hours after the commencement of proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nos. 97, 100, 108 to 110, 98, 99, 101 to 107, 111 to 181, 189, 192 to 194 and 240 to 282</td>
<td>The moment of interruption</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Subsequent stages
(4) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.
(5) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—[Brandon Lewis.]

Question agreed to.

Housing and Planning Bill
Consideration of Lords amendments

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I must draw the House's attention to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendments 37 to 58, 91, 184 and 185. If the House agrees to any of these amendments, I will cause an appropriate entry to be made in the Journal.

I also remind the House that certain of the motions relating to the Lords amendments are certified as relating exclusively to England, or to England and Wales, as set out on the selection paper. If the House divides on any certified motion, a double majority will be required for the motion to be passed.

Clause 2

WHAT IS A STARTER HOME?

5.28 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:
Government amendments (a) to (c) in lieu of Lords amendment 1.
Lords amendment 9, and Government motion to disagree.
Lords amendment 10, and Government motion to disagree.
Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendments 9 and 10.
Lords amendment 37, and Government motion to disagree.
Lords amendment 184, and amendment (a) thereto.
Lords amendment 47, and Government motion to disagree.
Lords amendment 54, and Government motion to disagree.
Lords amendment 55, and Government motion to disagree.
Lords amendment 57, and Government motion to disagree.
Lords amendment 58, and Government motion to disagree.
Lords amendments 2 to 8, 11 to 36, 38 to 46, 48 to 53, 56, 59 to 96, 182, 183, 185 to 188, 190, 191 and 195 to 239.

Brandon Lewis: I am glad to be back at the Dispatch Box and returning to the Housing and Planning Bill this afternoon. We are now in the final month of the first year of this Parliament: a Parliament that has seen a majority Conservative Government returned to the House—a Government with a clear mandate to deliver the largest programme of house building for a generation.

It is immensely fitting to be here this afternoon having come from Mr Speaker’s own garden, where construction people have been showing the importance of house building across our country and of bringing in
more skills to deliver the homes that we are determined to build. We want to place home ownership within the reach of thousands of people who never dreamed that they could achieve it. and we want to ensure that, in doing so, we make the best use of our social housing so that it continues to support those most in need.

The Bill before us today is a slightly different beast from the one we passed to the other place earlier this year. Today we will discuss rather more than the five or six amendments we traditionally see come from the other House. The vast majority of these I will ask this House to accept.

Debates in both Houses have been productive and resulted in improvements to the Bill. I want to be clear from the start. I have heard many, mainly on the Opposition Benches, say that we should have waited before debating the Bill. That would have meant the Government’s having to sit idly by, ticking forms and double checking that what the public elected us to do was what they actually wanted. We are debating the Bill early in this Parliament so that it can take effect as soon as possible and we can get those new homes built for those who aspire to have them.

5.30 pm

Starter homes will now be available to more people, including couples in which one partner is over 40, injured service personnel and bereaved partners of service personnel. There will be better protections for vulnerable people, thereby reducing the risk of properties being incorrectly declared abandoned. Our plan to replace higher-value properties expected to be sold with at least one new property is now explicit in the Bill, meaning we could not be clearer about our intention to increase the number of affordable homes across our country.

Brandon Lewis: I will deal with that in a few moments, when I come to higher-value assets and other aspects before us.

We have increased the protection we give to our rural areas, recognising the unique value of our countryside and the particular challenge of providing affordable homes there. I trust, therefore, that there is much on which we can agree with the other place.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the idea of more affordable homes for sale is extremely popular? I am getting requests. People want to get on with it, however, so I am going to say how long the process might now take?

Brandon Lewis: I will finish answering the last intervention, and then I will come to the Chairman of the Communities and Local Government Select Committee.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) is right. Whether through Twitter or email, I am hearing from a lot of people wanting to know when we will be able to deliver for the 86% of the population who want the chance to own a home of their own. It is absolutely right that we make affordable homes about affordable ownership as well as affordable rent.

Mr Betts: The Select Committee pushed the Minister on his impact and financial assessment of the full costs and implications of his policies around the sale of higher-value council homes; on whether those would deliver the replacement of housing association properties; and on all the remedial work on brownfield sites. When will that analysis be produced? I see that the other day the Public Accounts Committee made exactly the same criticism as the Select Committee: there is no information for us to go on.

Brandon Lewis: It was rather surprising to see the PAC reviewing a policy that has not gone through the House yet and which will deliver more home ownership to more people across the country, whether through the extension of right to buy, which will benefit 1.3 million people, or the intervention on starter homes.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Brandon Lewis: I give way to the Chairman of the PAC.

Meg Hillier: The Minister cited the PAC report published last Friday. Just to be clear, the Committee does look at issues in advance of their becoming law, to make sure that taxpayers’ money is protected in the process. He makes great play of providing more affordable homes for sale, but it is not clear how he will fund it or that there will be a like-for-like replacement of the homes he is forcing boroughs such as mine to sell in order to pay for them. Will he promise now to protect long-term social housing for the people in London who can afford nothing else, certainly not a starter home?

Brandon Lewis: In terms of making good use of our social housing stock, I am sure that the hon. Lady will support us in the votes later today, if there are any, on high-income social tenants. If she is that interested in delivering more housing in this country, however, I am surprised that this is the first time she has engaged directly with the Bill. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who mentioned the PAC report, asked about the data behind the policy. As I outlined at the end of last week, there are 16 million pieces of data impacting on this policy.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The Minister has made a lot of “affordable”. Can he define it? Is it right that an affordable starter home in London will be round about £450,000?

Brandon Lewis: The right hon. Gentleman might like to go back to look at the evidence given to the Committee that scrutinised the Bill or at the Bill itself. The £450,000 is a cap. He needs to look at the average price a
first-time buyer pays for a home in this country, which is £181,000. If we then include a 20% discount and allow the purchase with a deposit of just 5%, that really changes affordability. I hope the right hon. Gentleman will support the chance for more Londoners to get on the housing ladder, while understanding equally that this is not the only thing we are doing to promote affordable home ownership. There is a £4.7 billion scheme out there now for shared ownership, which also plays an important part, particularly in places such as London.

Meg Hillier: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way so that I can clarify both the role of the Public Accounts Committee and my role as Chair of it. We had a forensic investigation by the National Audit Office. We set out to be helpful to the taxpayer and to the Government in implementing their policy, ensuring affordability. We set out the key questions that needed answering before such a policy could be delivered. If I may say so, this Minister is being very cavalier in sweeping aside the findings of our report, which were well-measured, cross-party and unanimous.

Brandon Lewis: I have huge respect for the hon. Lady, but I was not sweeping anything aside at all. What I am more focused on—I make no apologies for it—is ensuring that we counter the cavalier attitude of the Labour party, which wants to do down people who want the chance to have a home of their own that they can afford to buy. We are determined to deliver our manifesto promise on that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Brandon Lewis: Let me make a bit more progress; I shall give way again later.

There is much on which we can agree with the other place here today, but let me be clear that, as we have just touched on, there are some areas where we cannot. We are determined to deliver for Britain on our election promises. The manifesto on which this Government were elected set out a very clear statement of intent. As I travel around the country, I find that people want to buy. We want to buy a home; we want to live in an affordable home ownership. There is a £4.7 billion scheme out there now for shared ownership, which also plays an important part, particularly in places such as London.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I must say to the Minister, with all due respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) to thank because we worked with him to ensure that for every home sold in London, at least two homes will be built, driving a direct increase in housing supply.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend highlights how this policy is about delivering for people on the ground. While Labour Members want to pontificate, we are going to stay focused on delivering homes for people across our country and here in the capital city of London.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): We need a policy to fit all parts of the country, including London. In inner London, however, starter homes will come in at £450,000. We have to speak the language of priorities. Is the Minister really telling us that a home that requires an income of £77,000 a year—more than an MP's salary—is genuinely the best priority for public funds?

Brandon Lewis: I am tempted to use the inimitable phrase, “I refer the hon. Lady to the comments I made a few moments ago.” As I said earlier, if she looks at the evidence, she will find that the price a first-time buyer pays is actually quite different. I mentioned my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) to thank because we worked with him to ensure that for every home sold in London, at least two homes will be built, driving a direct increase in housing supply.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. As I travel around the country, I find that people are frustrated and want us to get on with the policies that they elected us to deliver. That is because they see that Labour Members are trying to stall them through political posturing at pretty much every opportunity.

Let me also say, however, that some are understandably focused on London, where there is real pressure. We have my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) to thank because we worked with him to ensure that for every home sold in London, at least two homes will be built, driving a direct increase in housing supply.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. As I travel around the country, I find that people are frustrated and want us to get on with the policies that they elected us to deliver. That is because they see that Labour Members are trying to stall them through political posturing at pretty much every opportunity.

Let me also say, however, that some are understandably focused on London, where there is real pressure. We
[Brandon Lewis]

Our amendments provide for the Secretary of State to make regulations on the length of the taper period, and on the details of how the taper will operate. That will enable us to ensure that it is effective and delivers for people in the real world. The amendments set out two potential models for its operation. For example, when a starter home is sold, the first-time buyer must, if there is discount to be returned, pay a proportion of that discount to a specified party. That is the broad approach suggested in the other place, and I can see the logic of it. A body such as the Homes and Communities Agency could then use those funds to build more affordable homes.

As part of our consultation on starter homes regulations, we are seeking the views of developers, lenders and local authorities on how the taper would operate. We strongly believe that we should settle the matter through engagement with the sector, rather than placing the detail of restrictions in legislation. I am confident that that is the best way for us to meet our manifesto commitment on starter homes.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will the taper be regional, or will it be a “one size fits all” for the whole United Kingdom? As has already been pointed out, property prices vary considerably, and it is important to ensure that the people who benefit are those who will actually live in the properties.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend has made a good point. That is one reason why the strictures of legislation do not work in this context, and why it is important that we complete the consultation—which runs until 18 May in order to receive all the feedback and deal with this matter in regulations. As the discount is proportional, the difference in values will be dealt with by the way in which the percentages will work.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will recall that at the end of last year, in Committee, there were a number of exchanges about housing co-operatives. As a result of changes in the Bill, housing co-ops that own properties are largely exempt from many of its provisions, whereas those that manage properties on behalf of local authorities will still be badly hit by many of the provisions. Potentially, housing co-op properties will be among the 100,000-plus properties badly hit by many of the provisions. Potentially, housing co-ops that manage properties will be among the 100,000-plus properties currently owned by councils that are likely to be lost as a result of the Bill.

Might the Minister be willing to make a commitment, before the Bill returns to the other place, to look again at the specific impact on co-ops that manage properties on behalf of councils?

Brandon Lewis: I shall say a little about the provision concerned in a moment, but we will be very clear about the fact that a new home will be built for every home sold.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): How much consultation has the Minister had about the impact of the Bill with the voluntary sector on the one hand and local authorities on the other? He knows as well as I do that his Department will have conducted an impact assessment of costs and viability.

Brandon Lewis: We have worked across the sector, and it is clear that our starter home proposals are very popular. As Conservative Members have pointed out today, those in many areas are keen for us to get on with delivering more properties affordable to people who want to buy their own homes. There has been no such product in this country before.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The Minister speaks of affordability. Is he aware that the average deposit paid on properties in London is now £91,000?

Brandon Lewis: That is why we have extended and changed the arrangements. We now have the London Help to Buy scheme and we have starter homes coming in with a 20% discount. Shared ownership is also an important product, and we are determined to deliver 135,000 more shared ownership homes. The prospectus went out just a couple of weeks ago and the plan is to spend £4.7 billion in that area. Even in London, the deposit for such properties is closer to £4,000, which completely changes the affordability for people wanting to get into ownership.

Dawn Butler: One of the Lords amendments refers to the principle behind the Khan amendment, which is that when a unit of social housing is sold, another must be built in the local area in which the sale took place. Does the Minister agree with that?

Brandon Lewis: I shall deal with the hon. Lady’s question on high-value assets in just a few moments; I just want to finish dealing with starter homes.

Thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park, the pledge to deliver two homes for every home sold is now on the face of the Bill. As I said earlier, our manifesto was very clear, and this House was very clear when it voted by a majority of 91 to give the Bill a Second Reading. We will deliver the number of starter homes that we promised.

5.45 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): On the question of affordability and starter homes, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) mentioned the average deposit in London. However, a very big cash cost for any first-time buyer—or indeed any buyer—is stamp duty. Can the Minister confirm that the stamp duty payable on a starter home would apply to the discounted price and would therefore also be 20% lower?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The stamp duty will apply to the price paid for the property, so it will apply to that reduced price. That will provide a further benefit for people buying a new home.

We are absolutely determined to deliver the number of starter homes that we promised, in order to help first-time buyers, who were the worst-hit part of the homebuying sector in Labour’s great recession. However, in passing Lords amendments 8 and 9, the other place is seeking to stop us. This House should not stand for that. Those amendments would remove from the Bill the power to set a national starter homes requirement on housing sites. The other place has proposed to
replace that power with a locally set requirement that would be effective only when local authorities had completed studies of local housing need and viability.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): We hear a lot from local authorities about trying to secure rental properties, but we in this country have a right to own our own home and this Government are delivering that through this Bill. [Interruption.]

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, regardless of the comments from the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). My hon. Friend highlights why the Bill is so important. We cannot and should not have to wait for 336 different planning authorities to undertake local need and viability assessments before action on starter homes can be taken. These amendments would hit the very people we are trying hardest to help. First-time buyers would see their chance of home ownership kicked firmly into the long grass yet again by these proposals. That might be what Labour wants, but it is not what we want.

Mr Betts: I am trying to understand what the Minister actually does want. I am trying to work out whether starter homes will be built in addition to other homes that would have been built, or instead of them. The Select Committee unanimously agreed the following words:

“Starter Homes should not be built at the expense of other forms of tenure, where the need exists, it is vital that homes for affordable rent are built to reflect local needs.”

Will the Minister tell us whether the Bill as he would like it to be worded would make starter homes the priority and effectively push out and displace affordable homes for rent as part of the section 106 agreements?

Brandon Lewis: I must point out to the Chairman of the Select Committee that we have been clear from the beginning that we need to see a shift in this country. We have had the farcical situation in which we in this place talk about affordable homes but refer only to homes that people can rent. We know that 86% of our population want to buy their own home, and it is therefore absolutely right that affordable homes should include those that are available to buy. We make no apologies for creating a new product and for turbocharging that new product to ensure that we get 200,000 such homes built over the course of this Parliament. We already have many hundreds of thousands of homes in the rental sector across this country, and we now need to give first-time buyers a chance. To be blunt, that is exactly what we put on the tin in the general election manifesto. We will deliver on our mandate to deliver starter homes.

Mr Betts: Will the Minister give way?

Brandon Lewis: I am just going to complete this point. We will deliver on the mandate to deliver 200,000 starter homes, ensuring that we deliver homes for first-time buyers at a discount of at least 20% on the local market price.

We have also recognised in discussions in the other place that small sites in rural areas, known as rural exception sites, may require additional discretion on starter homes. Those details should be on the face of the Bill. We have listened to concerns that a compulsory requirement would disrupt the supply of rural exception sites. My noble Friend Baroness Williams of Trafford committed to bring back an amendment to give councils local discretion on rural exception sites. I am pleased to be able to honour that commitment in amendment (a) in lieu of amendments 9 and 10.

When I talk to developers and local authorities around sites around the country, they tell me that one benefit of starter homes is that more affordable housing may be delivered because developers will be allowed to deliver more. I have spoken to a number of developers who have said that the difference that starter homes would make is the ability to deliver 5% or even 10% more affordable housing in some developments in their areas.

There was a lot of discussion, both here and in the other place, about our plans to deliver the groundbreaking voluntary right-to-buy agreement through the sale of higher-value housing. It was another manifesto commitment passed from this House to the other place, and it is another change that we are discussing today. Amendments 37 and 184 would mean a considerable delay in receiving payments from local authorities, and therefore in delivering our manifesto commitment to extend the right to buy to housing association tenants. We remain convinced that the determination is the most appropriate way of setting out the information about the payment a local authority will be expected to make to the Secretary of State in respect of its higher-value housing. The key elements that will determine how much an authority will be expected to pay are set out on the face of the Bill. That includes the housing to be taken into account and the definition of vacancy.

The Government have listened carefully to the arguments made by hon. Members when the Bill was last debated and the contributions of all those in the other place. We have amended the Bill to ensure that local authorities are not disproportionately affected by the plans. The definition of higher value and the types of properties to be excluded will be set out in regulations and therefore subject to further parliamentary scrutiny.

I want to be clear with the House once again. In the other place, the Opposition were clear that they did not press the clauses enabling the voluntary right to buy to a vote and acknowledged our mandate for funding it. However, amendments 37 and 184 would seriously hamper our ability to implement it and so should be returned straightaway. The same applies to amendment 47, which is extremely restrictive and would prevent the Government from considering whether local authorities can actually deliver the required housing. We want to ensure that the Government can enter into agreements with local authorities about their local needs. By focusing solely on social housing, the amendment would prevent the agreement process from recognising that flexibility will be needed to respond to the country’s diverse housing needs—we have already heard from hon. Friends about the different needs in different places this afternoon—and that other types of housing may better meet local housing need.

I find it difficult to listen to those who accuse us of not being localist while tabling amendments that would mandate an old-fashioned, top-down approach. We want to ensure that we give local authorities with particular housing needs the opportunity to reach bespoke agreements on the delivery of different types of new homes.
Mr Betts: I am still as confused as I was at the beginning of the debate and at the Select Committee hearings. The Minister has just made an entirely reasonable point. I thoroughly agree that it should be for local authorities to determine the composition of homes to be built as part of section 106 agreements in their areas. How does that square with a policy of giving priority to starter homes and building 200,000 of them irrespective of the consequences for the building of other sorts of housing?

Brandon Lewis: I am actually talking about what will happen with the sale of higher-value properties, which is slightly different. We want to ensure that we give local authorities with particular housing needs the opportunity to reach bespoke agreements with the Government about the delivery of different types of new homes in their areas. If local authorities can demonstrate, for example, a clear need for new affordable homes, they should be able to make a case for such an agreement, subject to value-for-money considerations and evidence of a strong track record on housing delivery. That is important for areas that I have visited, such as Bath and Oxford. I met leaders in Cambridge and they want the flexibility to negotiate with Government and the Secretary of State to get the right deals for their area.

Victoria Borwick (Kensington) (Con): I welcome the fact that there will be more flexibility on higher-value homes, particularly for outliers and where prices are particularly high or particularly low in an area. I am delighted that the Minister has taken cognisance of the needs of various people in various different areas so that local need is met.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point about the importance of having this flexibility. In London, local authorities from across the parties have asked for the ability to work together to deliver on this front. We need new homes to be built in this country, and the amendment would limit the Government’s ability, and that of local authorities working with us, to ensure that the right mix of housing is delivered as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): My hon. Friend is being incredibly generous with his time. As he will know from his visit to Bath a couple of weeks ago, we do not have high-value assets, but housing costs are high in the area. Given the earlier announcement about the shift from high-value assets to higher-value assets, which will not be applicable in Bath, how can our authority combine with other authorities to bid for additional funds following the Budget announcement?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point. When I visited him and met constituents, developers and the local authority, I saw a really good example of an area that wants to deliver the right type of housing locally by understanding its local needs. Whether that involves working with the Government to bid for some of the £4.7 billion in the shared ownership fund or the £1.2 billion for starter homes on brownfield sites—

Mr Lammy: Will the Minister give way?

Brandon Lewis: I will just answer the previous intervention before I take one from the right hon. Gentleman. Local authorities could also work with authorities around the income from higher-value homes that they may be able to use to deliver elsewhere. It is important to get that flexibility and to understand that different authorities of different parties want it.

I now turn to amendments 54, 55, 57 and 58, all of which I disagree with. Amendment 54 would make our policy to implement fairer social rents voluntary. It is, as my noble Friend Baroness Williams said in the other place, a blatant denial of the primacy of this House. Local authorities can already operate the policy on a voluntary basis, but we are not aware that any have done so. To put it simply, it is a wrecking amendment and this House should treat it as such.

The policy must also apply consistently, as it would not be right for tenants in certain areas to face possible rent increases while tenants in a neighbouring area do not. The amendment completely undermines the Government’s aim of putting in place a consistent approach and of using the funds raised to reduce the national deficit, which we inherited from the Labour party. It would substantially reduce the revenue that the policy would generate.

Ms Buck: Will the Minister give way?

Brandon Lewis: I am happy to give way. Perhaps the hon. Lady is going to apologise for the debt and deficit that her party left.

Ms Buck: I draw the Minister’s attention to the fact that Westminster City Council, which, as usual, is in the vanguard of such things, announced in 2012 that it was extremely keen to introduce a version of pay to stay and to charge its higher-earning tenants additional rent. However, it has never done so because it has never found a way to introduce such a scheme that was not ridiculously bureaucratic and costly and that acted as a severe disincentive to work.

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Lady will be interested to hear what I have to say in a few minutes about how the policy will work in practice to ensure not only consistency, but that it always pays to work.

We have brought forward a package of amendments and statements of intent to ensure that the policy is fair and that it does not damage the incentive to find work and keep in work. In addition, we have committed to allow local authorities to retain reasonable administration costs, and my officials are working with the sector to establish an approach to implementation that would minimise costs.

Amendment 55 would set the amount of the taper at 10% on the face of the Bill. Our view is that a 10% taper is simply too low. Our preference is for a taper set at 20% or an extra 20p in rent for every pound earned above the income threshold. That would mean, for example, that a household earning over the £31,000 threshold would contribute just a few pounds a week in additional rent. The level recognises the importance of protecting work incentives, but it is a fairer contribution. It is important that we retain the flexibility to set the level of the taper in secondary legislation. We want to keep the position under review, and putting details on the face of the Bill would prevent us from doing so. We have confirmed that the regulations will be subject
to the affirmative procedure, which I am sure will be welcomed by the House, so there will be another chance to debate the regulations before they come into force.

Amendment 57 would set higher income thresholds, which totally undermines the principle that social tenants on higher incomes should start to contribute a fairer level of rent once they earn more than £31,000—or £40,000 in London. We have listened to concerns about the policy and taken a number of steps as a result. There will be an automatic exemption for any household in receipt of housing benefit and universal credit. The definition of “household” will not include income from non-dependent children, such as an 18-year-old who is starting his first job. Certain state benefits such as tax credits, disability living allowance and personal independence payments will not count towards the calculation of income, and the income thresholds will be supported by a taper, which will ensure that households towards the start of the proposed income thresholds see their rent rise by only a few pounds each week.

6 pm

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): I welcome the safeguards that my hon. Friend is setting out. Many Labour Members often argue that the rich should pay more, so is it not rather puzzling that in this case they seem to oppose that idea?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend and neighbour makes an interesting point, and people reading Hansard will want to draw their own conclusions about what it means. We are clear: it is right that social tenants on higher incomes contribute more in rent where they can afford to do so, but we are also mindful that the policy should protect work incentives.

Meg Hillier: I take great offence at the suggestion that two people—two pensioners, for example—on a fixed income of £40,000 a year in my constituency would be considered rich, or that they would have any other housing option. Those of a certain age on a fixed income cannot rent privately because the rent would be more than £1,500, and a lot more for a two-bedroom flat. They cannot buy, because the average property price is £682,000, and they would not qualify for a starter home, even if they wanted something of that size. Does the Minister acknowledge that it is invidious to attack those people who do not have a great deal of money?

Brandon Lewis: I do not think that that recognises the policy at all. The policy means that as people earn more, they will pay a few pounds a week more. I do not think that is unreasonable, and it ensures that we make the best possible use of our social housing stock.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is difficult to know where to start. The Minister talks about people paying an extra few pounds more, but that is nonsense. This is a tax on aspiration, and the idea that a family in London that earns £40,000 a year is rich is baloney. It costs an awful lot to live in this wonderful capital city of ours—something that the Minister is failing to grasp.

Brandon Lewis: If the hon. Lady reads the Bill and the amendment, she will appreciate that we do not suggest that people over that income should not stay in their home, or that they should move to private rented accommodation; we are saying that as people earn more money, they should contribute a little more into the system. That is reasonable, and it ensures that we make the best use of those properties for the people who need them most. The package we have announced ensures a policy that protects work incentives. On that basis, I cannot support amendment 57, or amendment 58, which raises the income thresholds by the consumer prices index, and I hope that the House will agree.

Mr Betts: The Communities and Local Government Committee took evidence from housing associations when the Government were planning to introduce this scheme for them, and we heard clear evidence that it would cost them more to administer the scheme than they would get in returns from extra rent. Will the Government present a clear analysis of the administration costs of this scheme, particularly for people on variable incomes whose income, and therefore rent, goes up and down each week? We would need enormous amounts of administration to go with this scheme.

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is missing the point. This is about fairness across the system. People in London—and cities in other parts of the country—who are in the private rented sector and earn these salaries, or higher and lower, are wondering about those in housing associations who earn more than £40,000. Examples have already been given in the House of Secretaries of State on salaries of £125,000, or union leaders on salaries of more than £100,000, who lived in social rented housing. Tens of thousands of people are earning more than £40,000 or £50,000 a year and are benefiting from social rents, which is simply not fair to those who do not have those salaries or opportunities.

Bob Blackman: Will my hon. Friend tell the House what the reality of social housing for rent in London and beyond is for people who are homeless to start with? There is a huge queue of people waiting for a socially rented property, and it is totally unacceptable for people who are on relatively high salaries to occupy those properties when there is such huge demand.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend places in keen focus one of the problems of the housing deficit that the Government inherited in 2010. Under the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), not only did we see the lowest level of housebuilding since about 1923, but in 13 years the Labour party built fewer social homes through their councils than we have built in the past four or five years. There is a huge amount to do to drive up the amount of housing so that there are more opportunities for people to have homes across all tenures, whether shared ownership, private rental or with affordable rent. We must ensure that more people have the chance to get on and achieve the aspiration held by 86% of the public, which is to buy a home of their own.

The House will be glad to hear that I will not speak to every Government amendment—you might also be pleased about that, Mr Deputy Speaker. Many of those amendments are minor and technical, and much as we might all enjoy it if I spoke to them all, some colleagues would not thank me because we might still be here by Prorogation. Each amendment makes the Bill work
better for those who implement these policies on the ground, and they have been tabled because the Government have listened to the debate and taken action as a result. We have strengthened people’s ability to own their own home and get Britain building again—improving on the 25% increase in building over the last year—and I hope that the House will agree to those changes made in the other place.

I also want to send a strong message that this Government will not slow the pace of housebuilding—we will increase it. We will not take away people’s dream of home ownership—we will inspire it, and we will deliver our manifesto commitments. When the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) responds to this debate, I hope that Labour Members will ask themselves why they stand against our mandate to boost home ownership and supply—something that the people of this country want and expect. While Labour blusters with political posturing after the abysmal housing mess that it left, we remain focused on building homes across our country and across all tenures. We will increase housing supply and home ownership. That is what we promised, and that is what we will deliver.

Dr Blackman-Woods: Absolutely. The question is: will this Bill deliver the homes? We do not think it will.

Faced with this bad Bill, a ridiculous timetable and long sittings, the other place has not only done an excellent job scrutinising the Bill, but improved it to make it slightly more palatable. If only the Government had had the grace to accept changes on starter homes, pay to stay and the forced sale of council housing that they are resisting today, it could have been improved further.

I want to deal first with the amendments the Government are voting against. On Lords amendment 1, we do agree with the principle of the Lord Best amendment and think it is important that if starter homes are resold within a given period, a paying back of discount should occur. We accept that the Government have brought forward a compromise which appears to do this to a degree, although we would still have a preference for the discount to remain in perpetuity, as this is a better use of scarce public resources.

Lords amendment 9, tabled by Lords Beecham, Kerslake and Kennedy, quite reasonably asks that:

“() An English planning authority may only grant planning permission for a residential development having had regard to the provision of starter homes based on its own assessment of local housing need and viability.”

The Minister will know that one of the greatest of the many concerns about the starter homes initiative is that such homes will be imposed, with specified numbers required by central diktat from government, regardless of whether they are needed in the quantities demanded. This amendment is a very localist one, seeking to give a role to local authorities in assessing the need for starter homes and their impact on the viability of local development.

Jake Berry: The hon. Lady says she is concerned about the Government dictating the number of starter homes that will be built in an area. Can she name any area in this country where she believes homes sold at a 20% discount are not needed by first-time buyers?

Dr Blackman-Woods: The hon. Gentleman makes a reasonable point, but the point I am making is that we will need not only starter homes, but other types of homes, particularly those for social rent. That is why the numbers should be subject to local determination and not central diktat.

To everyone except the Government, it appears eminently sensible that the need for starter homes should be assessed locally and then delivered, rather than ordered from on high, most likely to the exclusion of genuinely affordable housing for rent or equity share. This amendment is not a block on starter homes, but a requirement that they are part of a local housing mix.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): The hon. Lady needs to concede that Conservative Members have suspicions that her opposition to starter homes is ideological. Leaving that aside, she would be in a much stronger position were she to concede that a significant number of local planning authorities have not brought forward local district plans or county structure plans in a timely and appropriate fashion, and so the Government are forced to take action to tackle the housing crisis to which she refers.
Dr Blackman-Woods: But surely the hon. Gentleman must agree that the way of dealing with that is through the local plan-making system. Indeed, one of the amendments we might deal with later in our discussions this evening relates to the requirement that is finally being placed on local government by this Government to produce a local plan.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important point about localism. Do we not also need the local authority to determine what is truly affordable for its local housing market? I note that the Minister was not so forthcoming about his definition of “affordability”. He said in reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) that these homes in central London would not be sold at £450,000. What then is the point of a cap at £450,000—why not £150,000?

Dr Blackman-Woods: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and it shows why a local test of the need for starter homes is so important.

6.15 pm

As I was saying, Lords amendment 9 is not a block on starter homes but a requirement that they are part of a local housing mix. For that reason we shall be supporting the Lords in this amendment. We also find it odd that the Government want to replace Lords amendments 9 and 10 with one on rural exception sites. We support the Government having a policy on rural exception sites, but not at the cost of the exclusion of Lords amendments 9 and 10.

The sale of higher value council housing is one of the most contentious aspects of the Bill. We do not agree that the sale of higher value council housing should be used to fund the right to buy for housing association tenants. Lords amendment 37, tabled by Lords Kennedy, Lisvane and Kerslake, is very straightforward, requiring a setting out of the details of the calculation and payments to be made by local authorities and for them to be put in statutory instruments and subject to affirmative procedure in Parliament. All this amendment seeks is that information is put before Parliament, so that we know exactly what is being demanded from this additional tax on local authorities and so that we get an opportunity to vote on it in this House.

Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend raises an important point. My local authority is set to have to sell 700 homes over the next few years. It is building homes as fast as it can for people to buy and it is certainly not against starter homes, but in London this is a pipe dream for many. Does she not agree that we need to get the Government to address particular issues in high-cost areas such as mine that are forcing everybody out of ownership and out of having any realistic prospect of living there, even if they are on a pretty good income?

Dr Blackman-Woods: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point and I shall come on to deal with that issue when discussing a later amendment.

Why do the Government not want to provide the information I referred to and to have this scrutiny? The lack of information on this policy is an issue that has been taken up by the Public Accounts Committee, too. The Minister will be aware that it said:

“It is not clear how this policy will be funded in practice, or what its financial impacts might be. The Department’s intention is for this policy to be fully funded by local authorities, but it was unable to provide any figures to demonstrate that this would be the case...More widely, an even bigger risk will fall on those local authorities required to sell housing stock to fund the policy, as those assets will in effect be transferred to central government. But the Department did not appear to have a good understanding of the size of these risks”.

The Committee went on to say:

“The commitment to replace homes sold under this policy on at least a one-for-one basis will not ensure that these will be like-for-like replacements as regards size, location or tenure. Experience of the reinvigorated Right to Buy for council tenants, introduced in 2012, shows that meeting such one-for-one replacement targets can be difficult...Moreover, replacement homes can be in different areas, be a different size, and cost more to rent. Neither do they need to be new homes”.

Mr Betts: The Minister has said on a number of occasions that the sale of the “higher-value council properties”, as this has now become, will pay for the replacement of the right-to-buy property sold by a housing association and this £1 billion remedial brownfield fund. The fact that he has said that with such assurance must imply that he has some figures and some workings out somewhere on which he has based those assertions. Would it not be helpful if he could produce those today?

Dr Blackman-Woods: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. If the Minister has those figures, we will give him an opportunity now to share them with us, as that would be extremely helpful in allowing us to know exactly what we are going to be voting on this evening.

Although more information is important, we need to remind ourselves that the whole policy of selling off higher value council housing to fund the right to buy is considered by almost everyone to be a very bad thing to do, and that replacement is absolutely essential.

Lords amendment 47, tabled by Lords Beecham, Kerslake and Kennedy, addresses the issue of replacement, and would require the Government to enter into an agreement with a local authority under clause 72 whereby a local authority could show the need for a type of social housing and the Secretary of State would then agree a hold-back sum, so that homes sold could be replaced by houses of the same tenure, type and rent. If the Government do not accept this one-for-one, like-for-like replacement, they need to explain why. The reason this amendment is so important is that few details are in the public domain about how the Government will meet their own commitment for one-for-one or two-for-one replacement in London.

It appears that Ministers could force the sale of a council house in Camden and count two other new homes built for open market sale in Croydon as meeting the so-called commitment to replace. Therefore, the like-for-like replacement in amendment 47 is vital to ensure that housing need is met across the range and that homes for social rent are not simply replaced by starter homes or homes at higher rents, which, as the Public Accounts Committee outlined in its statement, is a real risk.
Furthermore, figures from Shelter this morning outline a truly alarming picture of the impact of the sale of higher value council homes on local authority stock, and I will come on to that in a moment or two.

**Catherine West:** Does my hon. Friend agree that this also punishes good councils that try to build social homes?

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** Indeed, but I suspect that that is part of the Government’s rationale.

Labour will be supporting the Lords in their amendment 47.

**Dawn Butler:** The Minister was talking about amendment 47. The important principle of the Khan amendment is that if a council sells social housing, it should replace it in the same area. On starter homes, it would be really great if the Minister could confirm that starter homes in my Brent constituency will be no more than £190,000, because that would change the whole tone of this debate.

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** My hon. Friend has asked the Minister to make that confirmation, but I doubt that he will take her up on that offer.

Let me move on to pay to stay, another pernicious bit of the Bill. As we all know, that is a tax on tenants and a tax on aspiration and will lead to many people having to leave their homes or increase their levels of personal indebtedness. The Minister should have talked to the group of tenants from Hackney whom I met a few weeks ago. They are not high-income families. How could anyone describe as high a household income of £18,000 outside London?

**Ms Buck:** Can my hon. Friend help me understand how Government Members are simultaneously arguing that a household income of £40,000 in London is rich when it comes to social rent, but that a household income of £77,000 is poor when it comes to getting a 20% discount on starter homes?

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** I look forward to the Minister’s answer to my hon. Friend’s question.

Such people, however, will be faced with a situation in which even a modest rise in income will result in a significant hike in rent. We spoke to a couple with a combined income of just over £40,000—one was a part-time cleaner and the other a sales associate. They want their children to go to university and just do not know how they will manage that in London if their rent moves towards a market one which, in their area, would represent an increase of 400%.

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree with the principle of means-testing tenants in properties that are set aside for people on lower incomes? I am talking about social rented properties.

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** As the hon. Gentleman sat on the Bill Committee, he should know that a voluntary scheme is already in place for local authorities and housing associations to do that very thing.

The tenants also object to their housing being seen as subsidised. In response to a written question, Baroness Williams said:

“Local housing authorities do not receive subsidy from the Exchequer; the Localism Act 2011 abolished Housing Revenue Account Subsidy.”

This housing is not subsidised, and in any case it is there to meet needs. It is outrageous that the Government are taxing tenants in such a way while claiming to stand up for hard-working people.

**Chloe Smith:** I am deeply worried that the hon. Lady cannot seem to agree with those housing charity chief executives who, in the Bill Committee’s evidence sessions, did accept the principle that social housing should go to those most in need. Considering that she based her argument on Lords amendment 1 around scarce public resources, I do not understand her position, so perhaps she could clarify it.

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** In the main, council housing in this country is allocated on the basis of need.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that the hard-working families who we see in our surgeries—I certainly see them in my surgery and I am sure that she sees them in hers—will get nothing from this measure? The single mum who is earning £17,000 and wants to get out of her dreadful private rented accommodation, which literally has rodents running around on the floor, will get nothing out of this, will she?

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** The right hon. Gentleman makes a really good point; that person will get absolutely nothing.

**Chloe Smith rose—**

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** I have already given way to the hon. Lady.

Lords amendment 54 would limit the damage of pay to stay by making it voluntary for local authorities, with authorities treated in the same way as housing associations. I do not understand why the Minister wants to treat council tenants differently. All the amendment asks is that council tenants are treated in exactly the same way as housing association tenants so, again, Labour will support the Lords amendment.

**Jake Berry:** Let me bring the hon. Lady back to her earlier comment about social housing being allocated according to need. The average salary in my constituency is £20,000 and there are more than 1,000 people on the housing waiting list. Does she accept that people on the average salary of £20,000 will feel aggrieved that they cannot get a social home if it is being occupied by a person who is earning £30,000, meaning that they are effectively paying tax to subsidise that person who is earning significantly more than them?

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** I do not accept most of what the hon. Gentleman says. What we must do is build lots more council houses in this country.

Lords amendment 55 would introduce a taper of 10p in every pound of a social tenant’s income above the minimum income threshold. This sensible measure would...
ensure that tenants would not face the cliff edge of a small rise in income leading to a huge rent increase. We know—the Minister confirmed this earlier—that the Government are planning a higher taper. I am pleased that he will keep the taper and the level at which it is set under review, and that changes will be subject to the affirmative procedure. We will need to look at that very closely indeed.

**Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for her response to my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry). Will she remind the House of the average earnings of a person in the UK, and then tell us whether social housing is for everyone or for those in genuine need, as there does seem to be a bit of confusion?

6.30 pm

**Dr Blackman-Woods**: As the hon. Lady knows, many people in this country and, I am sure, in her constituency, are on council waiting lists. What we should be thinking about is how to build more council houses to meet that need.

Lords amendment 57 would increase the thresholds for pay to stay to £50,000 in London and £40,000 outside London in order to limit the damage that this dreadful policy will cause. Similarly, Lords amendment 58 would ensure that income thresholds would increase in line with the consumer prices index, not at the whim of the Secretary of State. We note that the Government will vote against those amendments, but we could do with more explanation of the basis on which they will increase the thresholds.

There are too many Government Lords amendments to comment on, given the time available, although that again demonstrates a problem with this Bill. I will highlight a few of the other amendments in the group, however. We are pleased that the Government adopted Lords amendments 26 to 36, which were tabled by Lord Kennedy and Baroness Grender. The amendments will enable information to be given to third parties when the recovery of abandoned premises is sought and provide a definition of a “tenancy deposit”. My hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) and colleagues in the Lords worked hard to ensure that such measures were included in the Bill.

Government Lords amendments 38 to 43 replace the requirement for local authorities to sell off vacant high-value council housing with a requirement to sell off “higher value” vacant council housing. If selling off high-value housing was bad, selling off higher-value housing is much, much worse. Although the approach might help London a little, it will lead to more sell-offs in other areas. As the Public Accounts Committee noted, there is not enough information available on the impact of the policy or its scope to allow Parliament to vote sensibly on it. Shelter’s analysis found that to raise the £4.5 billion a year needed, each local authority could be asked to raise on average a massive £26 million. That corresponds to the sale of 23,503 council homes a year, which is six times more than it was estimated would be sold under the previous high-value regime.

Government Lords amendment 56 supports the exemption of some categories of persons—as yet unknown—from pay to stay provisions. Labour Members argued strongly for such a measure in Public Bill Committee. The amendment states that “regulations may create exceptions for high income tenants of social housing of a specified description.”

Do such tenants include people aged over 65, people with a registered disability, people with seasonal contracts of employment, or people who have a household member in receipt of care? We have no idea what the Minister intends, and that is not satisfactory.

Government Lords amendments 215, 217 to 221 and 233 amend proposals on ending security of tenure. Although we recognise that allowing 10-year tenancies, and longer tenancies if there is a child in the home, is a step forward, we still think that the whole policy is dreadful. Many people are commenting that what is really important about social housing, and council housing in particular, is that it provides security of tenure, and enables communities to be stable and to thrive. One can only wonder what will happen to parents when their children reach the age of 19, and what will happen if a young person wants to live at home beyond that age. The policy fails to acknowledge that we are talking about people’s homes. The Government should bring forward proposals to extend security of tenure in the private rented sector, rather than reducing that security for council housing tenants, with all the social upheaval and personal anxiety that that brings with it.

Lords amendments 90 and 91 deal with electrical safety checks. I am pleased that the Government were forced by the action that we took in the Commons, and by their lordships, to adopt the amendments, which would put a duty on private landlords to ensure that electrical safety standards are met, and that checks are carried out at a reasonable frequency and by people with the proper expertise. We should thank Baroness Hayter and others for tabling those amendments and arguing for them in the Lords.

Finally, I am pleased that their lordships have insisted that the regulations that we are still to receive—there are many—that will set out much of the detail of the Bill must, in the main, be subject to the affirmative procedure. This includes measures on banning order offences, and determinations and regulations relating to vacant higher-value housing, high-income social tenants, electrical safety, client money protection and planning freedoms. I thank the Lords for ensuring that the Government’s nasty habit of putting through important regulations under the negative procedure ceases.

As the whole housing world has acknowledged, the Bill does little to solve our housing crisis, yet will make things a whole lot worse for the supply of genuinely affordable housing. According to Inside Housing, the Bill has been producing headaches for the Prime Minister, but I am sure he will be pleased to know that he will not need a junior doctor to cure his headaches—all he needs to do is to drop this dreadful Bill.

**Seema Kennedy** (South Ribble) (Con): I draw Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I am pleased to support the Bill. The passions raised in Committee and now in the Chamber are testament to the fact that we know that we need to build more homes. Many of our constituents want to get on the housing ladder and the Bill does great service for that cause. There is no doubt that house building took a hit following the recession that began in 2008, but I am pleased to note that as our Committee stage was winding
up in December last year, housing building completions were at their highest level since 2008, with 143,000 completions in that calendar year. That is to be applauded, but there is still much more work to be done to fulfil the aspirations of the 86% of our fellow Britons who want to own their own home.

Starter homes are an essential part of that offering, to allow young people to own their homes, rather than renting for years on end or perhaps for ever.

Meg Hillier: Most of us on the Opposition Benches would agree that a starter home for a young family is a great thing. Does the hon. Lady not regret that over the past eight years, under a Conservative Mayor of London, we have seen a lot of housing built, but it is for private sale at inflated prices—luxury homes sold to overseas developers, and in no way within reach of local people in my constituency or across London?

Seema Kennedy: I have great respect for the hon. Lady and the work she does on her Committee, but, with great respect to the Opposition, this is not a debate just about London, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) pointed out. Much of the debate in Committee and the Chamber has been about London. There are affordable houses, and I know that in London there are many. However, there are 590 MPs who represent areas outside London.

Mr Jackson: It was a great pleasure to serve with my hon. Friend on the Bill Committee. She touches on an important point. Does she agree that none of our witnesses was able definitively to demonstrate that, leaving aside London and most of the south-east, starter homes with the right vehicle, such as Help to Buy, would be unaffordable? For the vast bulk of England, they were affordable.

Seema Kennedy: Indeed. Those happy days in November and December that we all spent together in Committee were an unalloyed joy. With the right vehicle, such as Help to Buy ISA, and with shared ownership, starter homes are affordable in many areas, including developments that I have visited in my constituency of South Ribble. For the generation between 20 and 40, which has been disproportionately affected by the increase in house prices, starter homes are a way to get on the property ladder, and we should welcome the commitment to build these 200,000 homes.

Dawn Butler: I am a London MP. It might be difficult for Members who are not London MPs to understand how difficult and how unaffordable it is to live in London, but that is why London MPs make the points they do. It may be of interest that Londoners will be voting on Thursday in what is almost a referendum on the housing crisis in London.

Seema Kennedy: I will let other London MPs respond more fully on the particular London issues.

Jake Berry: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Seema Kennedy: I will make a little progress—otherwise, I will be up and down like a fiddler’s elbow.

Let me turn quickly to amendment 1. A 20% discount over 20 years does not really take account of the practicalities of people’s lives—20 years is far too long. We are talking about starter homes, so one would hope that people are not going to live in them for 20 years. As the Minister said, the average time people live in a house is seven years, not 20. The amendment places restrictions on starter home owners, who are precisely the generation—those aged 20 to 40—who the Bill aims to empower. I am glad the Government are consulting on the duration of the discount and the taper. If we want builders to build and lenders to lend, we need to take a practical, not an ideological, approach—the policy has to work.

Lords amendments 9 and 10 would replace the national requirement with a requirement that is set locally, depending on local housing needs and viability assessments. That completely undermines our manifesto commitment to build these 200,000 homes, but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) mentioned, that policy is very popular. Constituents come to us saying, “I want to get a starter home. How can I get my foot on the ladder?” If we were to remove the national requirement, I fear we would delay the process.

Andrew Gwynne: Earlier the hon. Lady actually made the case for a more localist approach. She said she was not a London Member and that circumstances in her constituency were very different from those in the capital. Surely, if there are different circumstances in different parts of the country, we need a local approach.

Seema Kennedy: I have the greatest respect for the hon. Gentleman, but the Lords amendments would hold the process up; we would get to 2019, and no starter homes would have been built—I really fear that that would happen. The amendments would slow things down, but we need to start building now.

As we know, house prices have risen exponentially, particularly in London, but that is because of a lack of supply. The picture is complicated, and one could not say that things have happened for one particular reason, but the lack of supply is a fundamental block, and we touched on that all the way through Committee. We need to get more houses built—and quickly.

There was much debate in Committee about permission in principle—the new consent model of planning—which will provide certainty.

Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Seema Kennedy: I am afraid I am going to make a little more progress.

Developers and builders want certainty and speed. One brake on development is the lack of certainty and the slowness of certain planning departments. The whole essence of the Bill is to get the country building homes—to increase the supply and to make more people home owners.

This measure is particularly effective for small builders, who do not have the scale to have in-house planning departments. Measures to encourage those who might build 10 or 20 homes in a village are particularly effective.
Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is the small builders who actually get on and build, whereas the large developers are often slow at delivering projects? Anything we do to support small builders on small sites will improve the housing supply.

6.45 pm

Seema Kennedy: I agree. Given how small builders are funded and run, they are not land banking in the same way. They want to build homes and move on, whereas the large multiples have a different approach because they are land investors as well as builders. I think there is very much a cross-party consensus that we need more units built. That is the whole essence of the Bill.

I welcome the Lords amendments that exclude the winning and working of minerals, which covers fracking. In areas such as South Ribble and the Bowland basin, where companies have made initial exploratory attempts, that will give reassurance to some of my constituents.

We need to build more homes. The Bill will provide some hope and, hopefully, some homes for the many of our constituents who aspire to own a home of their own.

Mr Betts: The most astounding thing about the Government’s proposals is that we are expected to make decisions about them today without any idea of the costings. When the Minister came to the Communities and Local Government Committee, he said the Government would produce costings in due course—I think he actually said spring was the likely time. Well, here we are in the spring, and I have not seen any figures.

It is astounding that we should hear from the Government over and over again that the sale of a, now, higher-value council home will pay for the replacement of that home, the replacement of a housing association property that is sold and the £1 billion fund for remedial work on brownfield land. If the Government are clear that that is what their policies will do, will they please show us the figures? If they are clear that that is what will happen, they must have the figures to have made their promises on. Or are they simply telling us they believe that that is how things will work out, but without any clear evidence to support that?

That is a matter of great concern. It was a concern to the Select Committee, which, having heard the evidence, correctly said:

“We have not seen evidence that the Government has fully costed the proposals and we call on it to do so as a matter of urgency.”

That was agreed at the beginning of February; we are now three months further on, but we still have no figures. The Public Accounts Committee made exactly the same point in its report, and it seemed a very reasonable point, regardless of whether we think the PAC should look at policy before or after it is implemented. The Committee said:

“The Department should publish a full impact assessment containing analysis in line with the guidance on policy appraisal in HM Treasury’s Green Book, to accompany the proposed secondary legislation”.

When will we see the figures? We have not got them for the Bill. Will we have them before any secondary legislation comes before the House for approval? Will the Minister make a firm promise that that will be the case? He referred to further secondary legislation on higher-value council homes. Will these proposals be thoroughly and properly costed before we reach that point? This is a serious matter—the right of the House to have information before it passes legislation.

Let me come now to starter homes. Again, it has been a little hard to understand how the Government’s policy will work. When the Minister came before the Communities and Local Government Committee, he said that local authorities meeting developers to discuss section 106 agreements would have discretion over what mix of affordable housing would be built. Can we have some clarity on that? Will starter homes take absolute priority, with local authorities having no choice but to build them to hit the Government’s 200,000 target, and if there is a bit of money left, perhaps putting one or two affordable homes for rent on the site? Or will local authorities, as they are currently allowed to, come to their own view about section 106 agreements and about the right mix of affordable homes on the site, whether that means starter homes—now defined as affordable homes—homes to rent or shared ownership? What is actually going to be the case?

What about areas of land in my constituency where there is no requirement for any affordable housing at present because the sites are not considered to be viable, yet viability is an important test under the national planning policy framework guidelines that local authorities have to work to? Will the Government insist that starter homes are built on a site where it is not currently considered viable to have any section 106 provision for affordable housing? How is that going to work—or will there be local discretion in that regard as well? We need some clarity.

We also need clarity about the replacement of the higher-value council homes as to precisely what sort of homes they will be replaced with, how that will be defined, and what the negotiation process between Government and local authorities will look like. Will it be a case of starter homes at all costs, or are we going to be in a position where affordable homes to rent can be part of the replacement situation, going back to “like-for-like”?

The Chartered Institute of Housing produced evidence to the Select Committee in which it estimated that during the course of this Parliament there would be 300,000 fewer social homes to rent than there were at the beginning. The Minister likes to take credit for the previous coalition Government having built more council homes than were built under the Labour Government, but let us get to the point: during this Parliament, will there be 300,000 fewer social homes to rent, not just council homes but housing association properties, as the Chartered Institute of Housing has estimated? The Government disagree with that figure, but will they say what they expect their policies to produce by the end of this Parliament?

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Betts: Of course I give way to the hon. Gentleman, who is a member of the Select Committee.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman will remember the clear evidence given by David Orr of the National Housing Federation, who said that because of these proposals housing associations will be building more properties of all tenures.
Mr Betts: We had evidence from various housing associations about how they were going to respond to the proposals. Some made it very clear that they felt they were gaining fewer properties to rent under section 106 agreements than under the previous legislative arrangements. They also made it clear that given that there is now no money in the Government’s housing programme for the rest of this Parliament for any houses to rent, in terms of grant assistance, all the resources—the £8 billion—will go either to starter homes or to shared ownership. Many associations believe that they will be building fewer homes to rent on an affordable basis because of the combined effects of policy as a whole. That will vary from association to association.

Tony Stacey, the chief executive of South Yorkshire Housing Association, told us that in much of the area where his association works it would not be possible to build back with the money that will be given from the sale of housing association property, and it was likely that the association would simply go and buy up another property in the private rented sector. That could happen as well, and it would not act on the housing stock. There will be very different policies in different areas. I would argue strongly, in relation to starter homes, that we should reflect that by enabling local authorities to come to different agreements that suit their local needs. As the hon. Gentleman will recognise, the Select Committee said very clearly:

“Starter Homes should not be built at the expense of other forms of tenure...it is vital that homes for affordable rent are built to reflect local needs.”

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that research commissioned by the Local Government Association highlights the fact that in 220 local authority areas, people who are in need of affordable housing will not be able to take advantage of the starter homes that are being proposed?

Mr Betts: Yes. It is interesting that my hon. Friend mentions the LGA, which argued very strongly, on a cross-party basis, that the policy of the right to buy for housing association tenants should not be funded by the sale of local authority assets. I will make sure that I get the Committee’s words right in quoting them to the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). We said that “public policy should usually be funded by central Government, rather than through a levy on local authorities.”

As usual, perhaps the Government ought to listen to the words of the Select Committee. The whole issue of the right to buy for housing association tenants would not be a significant point of contention if the Government were not forcing the sale of local authority homes to pay for it—and we still have not had the figures to show how that would work. With regard to sorting out more flexibility on starter homes, I still do not know what their policy amounts to because of the lack of clarity that we have had.

Finally, I want to raise two really worrying issues where the Select Committee did not come to a view—lifetime tenancies and pay to stay. We welcome the fact that pay to stay will be voluntary for housing associations. However, the situation will be a bit strange in a street where two tenants are earning the same amount of money and paying similar rents, one in a housing association property and one in a council property, and one finds their rent going up and the other does not. Let us get away from the talk about subsidised council housing. There is no central Government subsidy to housing revenue accounts, so there is no subsidy to council tenants earning a little more than their neighbours next door, but what there will be, if this measure goes through, is a tax on those tenants, because the money will go not to the council but to the Treasury, and the Treasury levying a charge on a council tenant is a tax by any other name—of course it is.

Let us put that together with the lifetime tenancy issue. Are we really going to end up with council estates where some homes will have been sold, but in different proportions in different areas, some of which will then have been sold on into the private rented sector, so that we have an increasing mixture of people on the lowest incomes and people there on only a short-term basis? By forcing their rents up, we will push out people on slightly higher incomes who may have a long-term commitment to the area and roots in the area. They may be the people who run the local housing association, the local residents group or the local community forums, and are really active there. Of course, the very same people will be the longer-term tenants who have a real interest in and long-term commitment to their area.

What does this policy, and this mixture of policies, do for social cohesion? It undermines the whole idea of a long-term commitment by people who are rooted in their areas and want to stay there because they enjoy living there, they have connections there, their kids go to school there, and that is where their home is.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way on that brilliant point. Does he agree with some commentators that this Bill—this sounds very dramatic but it is very serious—marks the end of mixed communities in a number of London boroughs?

Mr Betts: Potentially it does, because driving out all the people on slightly higher incomes and removing people who are potentially longer-term tenants creates a very different sort of community. We have to be very careful about that.

Chris Philp: While I have sympathy with some of the points the hon. Gentleman is making, does he not accept the principle that with regard to a scarce social resource like social housing, it is simply common sense to make sure that that scarce resource is targeted at those who are most in need, as this Bill seeks to do?

Mr Betts: I would argue this: let us tackle the scarcity. Let us start a building programme of 100,000 social homes a year. That is the only way that we will hit the target of the quarter of a million homes this country will need. We have never built a quarter of a million homes without a massive social house building programme, and it is unlikely we will do so in future.

I will make one more point about the mix of communities. In other communities where there is, at the very beginning, a limited number of social rented properties, the right to buy that has already happened, together with the proposed extension of the right to buy, will mean that those are exactly the same communities that have the higher-value council homes. Not only will the right to buy remove social housing in those areas,
but the sale of vacant higher-value council properties will remove social housing as well. It is likely that, in future, some communities will have no social housing to rent whatsoever, irrespective of people's needs. That is the other conclusion, and it is very worrying indeed. In some communities, there will be no home available for those on low earnings or short-term tenancies who have a real housing need but who cannot afford to buy. That is another product of the Bill and I am against it. I hope that Members will support the Lords amendments to at least mitigate its worst impacts.

7 pm

Scott Mann: The House will probably be aware that I am passionate about home ownership and about helping people on modest incomes to be able to afford to buy their first home. In fact, such is the interest that I have taken in housing that I am referred to as a housing spokesman by my Cornish Conservative colleagues, and for that I am thankful.

For more than a quarter of a century, housing policy has failed the people of Cornwall. Thanks to this Government, we now have a number of approaches that will change that, including the introduction of starter homes, Help to Buy, the newly announced £19 million self-build project for the south-west, and continuing discussions with lenders about affordability. We now finally have a number of policies in place that will help the Cornish working population own their own home.

Many colleagues across the House will know the amazing feeling when you buy your first home—the sense of pride and achievement when you get the keys to the front door. It is one of those first big steps in life, like being accepted to university, getting married or having your first child.

When the Bill first appeared in this House back in October, the Government had clear goals to build more homes for a growing population and to reform the planning process. That included 400,000 new homes by 2020; 200,000 starter homes; the extension of right to buy to housing association tenants, turning generation rent into generation buy; and speeding up the planning process.

Since then, I have had many conversations with councillors in Cornwall who have been concerned about certain aspects of the Bill, including the right-to-buy policy and making councils sell off their high-value council houses. That policy could result in coastal communities in Cornwall losing very important social housing stocks, unless like-for-like replacements are built. I therefore welcome amendments 42A, 44A and 44B to clause 2, which were tabled in the other place by Baroness Williams and which allow some flexibility to the under-40 cap for purchasing a starter home. Some people over 40 are still looking to buy their first home—many of them in Cornwall—and certain exemptions will benefit couples where both are over 40 and have a right to buy their first home.

To give those starter homes some security, the Government’s Lords amendments 2 and 3 to clause 2 will introduce a minimum age of 23 to buy a starter home, which is a good policy. It will prevent abuse of the system by those who would try to buy a starter home with a 20% discount by using a young person or a student who otherwise would not intend to buy one.

Turning to part 4 of the Bill, I want to address amendments relating to high-value local authority housing. The initial announcement that councils would be made to sell off such housing caused concern in Cornwall, because the county has a high level of coastal communities where properties have, through no fault of those communities, increased significantly in value in recent years. The selling off of high-value council assets would have resulted in a reduction in the number of homes available to people on low or modest incomes, and would likely have increased second-home ownership. That would have been bad not only for local families but for local communities, as families would have moved to urban areas, thereby bringing about a decrease in local trade.

The Government’s Lords amendment 53 replaces the term “high value” with the term “higher value”, which will introduce a much more local approach, as housing prices differ from area to area. A council house worth £400,000 may have been deemed worthy of selling off, given that that figure is very high compared with that for a council house in an inland urban area. Without protection, communities could suffer.

Local people in coastal communities should not have restricted access because of where they grew up. I am therefore very pleased that the Secretary of State and Baroness Williams acknowledged concerns about the issue and made changes accordingly to give more freedom to local authorities over how they classify their higher value council homes.

I will not address other amendments now, because I want fellow Members to have the opportunity to speak. Suffice to say that the amendments I have touched on strengthen the Bill; illustrate the Government’s commitment to addressing the housing and planning challenges of the modern age; and ensure that rural communities are better protected while we drive towards more affordable homes throughout the country.

Ms Buck: I make no apologies for returning to the issue of London, because that is where housing need is sharpest and where the affordability crisis is most severe. I find myself in the rare position, for one night only, of being in some harmony with Westminster City Council—a rare thing indeed. Its policy and scrutiny committee’s report on the Bill is deeply fascinating. It makes it clear—in moderate tones, but its content is unmistakable—what it thinks about the Bill and how it will impact on housing supply. Following on from a point made by my hon. Friend the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee, it says:

“The Bill is largely a framework”,

which I think is a euphemism for, “We have no idea how most of it is going to work.” That point of view was spelled out more sharply by the Public Accounts Committee—which Chair is not in her place at the moment—which absolutely stripped away the pretence of the calculations on which high-value sales have been predicated. Westminster City Council itself, however, is clear that the Bill will have a severe impact on housing and that it will also have wider implications, which I will address in a moment.

We do not know what the redefinition of sales from “high value” to “higher value” will mean for local areas. When Shelter did its initial calculation, it found that Westminster was likely to have to sell off 76.3% of its
council properties as they became vacant. That would mean a sale rate of 246 a year. We do not know—as we keep saying about this Bill—what the new calculation will mean. The Minister has offered no calculations. The council’s latest estimate, however, is that it will need to sell 200 high-value voids a year in order to fund the right-to-buy housing association properties and that that will be worth £100 million year.

Here is the rub: not only will that reduce the stock and have massive implications for meeting housing needs, but it will simply displace costs into other areas of public expenditure. Westminster City Council has said that that will result in additional costs of £1.5 million a year for temporary accommodation for homeless families. The local taxpayer already has to fund temporary accommodation to the tune of £4 million a year above what the Government pay. An extra £1.5 million will be needed to meet some of the costs of homelessness that will result from the fact that the council will not be able to place people with housing need in its council or housing association stock because it will have been sold off in order to fund the right to buy.

**Chris Philp:** Will the hon. Lady join me in welcoming the fact that in London, for every single high-value unit sold, there will be two replacements? Does she agree that, across London as a whole, that will ease the housing problems?

**Ms Buck:** No, I do not welcome that at all. As we heard in the superb speech from the Front Bench by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), we do not know what tenure those homes will have or where they will go. We have no guarantees whatsoever that they will be local. Therefore, they will simply not provide an equivalent level of accommodation or meet need. I cannot remember who said this, but that could result in rental properties for low-income households in inner London being sold to subsidise homes for sale somewhere else, thereby meeting a totally different kind of need.

Westminster City Council also points out—that this has not been brought up this evening—that, in order to deliver the two-for-one requirement, the increase in housing delivery would have to be dramatically increased from its current rate, but there is no indication of how that will be achieved. The council has a long list of asks and to how the high-value sales programme will be organised and how inner-London authorities, including itself, would be protected. The Minister has given no answers whatsoever.

The council has also provided further context and it is interesting, given some of our discussions about pay to stay. Government Members describe anybody with a household income of £40,000 as rich, and the council has pointed out that the Government are imposing a higher pay-to-stay requirement on such households while at the same time cutting rents. They are cutting rents for everybody, including working households. People are being asked to pay a higher rent if they have a household income of £40,000, but they get a 1% cut in their rent at the same time. I simply do not understand the logic of that.

In my local authority, the implications are a loss to the housing revenue account of £32 million over the next four years and £237 million over the next 30 years, which will mean, as the local authority says, major cuts to the quality of existing properties or plans for new affordable house building. Yet again, the Government are giving with one hand and taking away with the other—indeed, they are taking away with a third hand, in this case—the capacity to provide additional homes. All that can be fairly summarised as meaning that the council that gave us homes for votes in the 1980s—the biggest scandal in modern local government history—is saying, “Even we do not like this.”

The council does not like the Government’s proposed starter homes policy either. The consultant who advised the council on the Housing and Planning Bill pointed out that a starter home capped at £450,000 in inner London, where the average open market property is going for £2 million, lavishes a gain on a particular small cohort of first-time buyers. Westminster Council states that “the potential tax-free capital gain, after eight years of occupation…is very considerable (depending on the number of bedrooms) and wholly to the benefit of a first-time buyer”.

**Michelle Donelan:** It is interesting to hear about the housing market in London, but does the hon. Lady recognise that in Wiltshire, one of the fundamental reasons why we have an above-average ageing population is that young people cannot afford to buy in the area, and so they are leaving it? Does she agree that for the local health of communities such as mine, initiatives such as starter homes are a very good and reasonable policy that will enable people to enter the housing market?

**Ms Buck:** Funnily enough, that is almost the thrust of my argument. Things that are applicable in the hon. Lady’s constituency are not necessarily applicable in mine, so we want to have local flexibility and the freedom to develop a strategy that meets local needs. Also, I do not see why my constituents who are in housing need should fund home ownership for her constituents. We absolutely have to meet local needs; that is intrinsic to the idea of a local authority having statutory duties to meet housing need. I am afraid that I do not accept her point at all.

I know that other people want to speak, so I will not dwell on the issue that has already been raised—I have also raised it previously—about the income that people need to afford starter homes in places such as central London. It seems extraordinary that, on one hand, we think that social housing is a rare good that has to be rationed because we have to speak the language of priorities, but, on the other hand, our priorities are such that we can afford to give a 20% discount to people with incomes of up to £77,000 in central London. My colleagues and I, and Westminster City Council, make it absolutely clear that the strategy, as it is being imposed across the country, will have a very serious and negative effect in central London. It will provide a windfall gain for a very lucky and small cohort of people—good luck to them—but that, critically, will be bought at the expense of others.

I remind the House of what we have seen in recent years as a consequence of the Government’s catastrophic housing failure. In my area, we have 600 fewer social housing units than we had in 2009. We have 2,414 households in temporary accommodation. The number
of people in housing need on the housing register has doubled to 4.5 million since it was redefined, and reduced, in 2012. We have 1.2 million people on the housing register across the country. There has been an 80% rise in homelessness acceptances in London. We have seen a soaring housing benefit bill in the private sector, and a time bomb of housing benefit expenditure is coming down the line as low-income households are forced into the private rented sector. That is all before the Government cut housing benefit still further.

I end by going back to the point about the lottery. Good luck to those people who get the benefit of high value starter homes, but why should that be at the expense of people such as my constituents: the healthcare assistant I met last week, who is bidding for housing association homes where the monthly rent is more than her take-home pay; the family so overcrowded that their little son, who is suffering from skin cancer, has to share a bed with his siblings; the family of six—two parents and four young adults, two of whom are severely disabled—in a property so small that their wheelchair-bound son is unable to do his required physiotherapy; or the mum with two young children who was moved from Westminster and her local job to the edge of London, from where she has to commute in, getting her children up at 5.30 in the morning and returning home at 9.15 in the evening, who is weeping with the stress of her experience—it is duplicated in hundreds of other families—and who tells me that her daughter does not want to live with her anymore because she cannot bear the stress of homelessness? The Housing and Planning Bill, unfortunately, says that those people and their needs do not matter, and that housing will not be provided for people like them.

Much as I applaud initiatives to support affordable home ownership—and I do—I do not think that it should be achieved at the expense of people in housing need. That is what the Bill does, and that is why it is so pernicious. That is why I hope that we will be able to secure progress on at least some of the amendments that were achieved in the other place a couple of weeks ago.

7.15 pm

Bob Blackman: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), although I suspect that my perspective on housing in London, the south-east and the rest of the country is very different from hers. We have to start from the housing problems that we have and to remember that, as I think the Chair of the Select Committee pointed out, for far too long we have not built enough homes—irrespective of whether they are for sale, for rent or for social rent—in this country. The key point is that we have to ensure that the delivery of new housing begins apace, and the Bill contributes towards exactly that requirement.

We need to face up to the fact that a small number of very large house builders in this country ration the development of land to maximise their profits from the sale of the homes that they build. We must break the stranglehold of that consortium and encourage small developers to develop new groups of houses, which will give people the opportunity to buy those homes. In addition, over the past 10 years, social rented accommodation has been completed solely by registered social landlords—what we call housing associations—which sit on huge bank balances and assets that they could utilise to build far more units than they do. Far too many housing associations are coasting and not providing the sort of accommodation that we all wish to see. Somehow, we have to break through.

The Bill also resolves the problem that it is very hard for young people to afford the deposit that they need to buy their first home. The principle—the Labour party has not yet fully appreciated this—is that the Government are switching resources from social rented accommodation to the development of starter homes for sale, so that young people and families have the chance to own their own home. Home ownership among that group of people has dropped through the floor. The average age at which someone buys their first property is now about 37, and it is going up all the time. Many people now believe that they will never own their own home, because their income is insufficient.

Mr Jackson: Is there not an issue of fairness and social equality here? It was reported today that 25% of the funding for first-time buyers comes from mum and dad—the family. Is it not unfair that if an individual has wealthy parents, their parents can cascade that wealth to them? This policy, under a Conservative Government, will spread the wealth and enable people on modest incomes not to have to rely on the bank of mum and dad to buy their first home.

Bob Blackman: It is quite clear that we want a more democratic system in which people have the opportunity to buy their own homes. The principle introduced in the Bill of encouraging home ownership through that process must be right. Equally, it is quite clear that an unfinished piece of business from the Thatcher revolution of the sale of council homes under the right to buy was that housing association tenants did not have the same opportunity, so I am delighted that the Government are putting that right.

It is right to ensure that people who exercise the right to buy continue to live in their properties as owner-occupiers. It is not right that people should suddenly have a windfall because, having been in social rented accommodation, they are offered a discount on a property that they can either immediately resell or re-let. There should be a taper, and I am glad that the Government have seen sense in accepting that such a taper should apply. There is an argument—or a discussion—about where the taper should start, but the reality is that the vast majority of people see that as the right way forward. People buying a property under the buy-to-let process should also have the opportunity to ensure that they get a discount under the Help to Buy arrangements but, equally, they should not be allowed suddenly to get a windfall and then move on.

Catherine West: What does the hon. Gentleman think of the suggestion recently made by one of my constituents that the right to buy should also apply to private sector tenancies? Should there be a public subsidy so that somebody has the right to purchase a private tenancy?

Bob Blackman: It is quite clear there should be an opportunity for everyone to exercise the right to buy. In London, people who use buy-to-let arrangements are getting a return of probably about 3% to 4% on their
In London for the very people they represent. I suggest that we should reject all the Lords amendments that are a deliberate attempt to wreck the scope of the Bill, which contributes to the creation of more housing and more affordable housing, to the opportunity for people to own their own homes, and to local authorities working in partnership with the Government to deliver the homes that people want.

Dr Blackman-Woods: The hon. Gentleman has had much to say about pay to stay, but has he looked at the Government’s own consultation on the policy, which showed that 75% of people disagreed with the thresholds that the Government are setting? In fact, a huge majority disagreed with the voluntary policy that is already in place with a threshold of £60,000. I am not sure where the hon. Gentleman gets the idea that this policy is readily accepted by everyone; it simply is not, and not at the current thresholds.

Bob Blackman: If individuals are not contributing additional rent towards the social rent they are being charged at the moment, I can understand people saying, “I don’t want to pay any more.” Who would want to pay more? That is a foolish view to put forward. We must ask what is fair and reasonable to ensure that we can change the situation in this country by creating more housing and encouraging the development of more housing, while making sure that people pay a reasonable rent so that they are not subsidised by other taxpayers on lower incomes who are struggling either in private rented accommodation or to buy their own homes. Such a view is not fair or reasonable, and it must change.

I end, as I began, by saying that I commend the Bill and the Government amendments to the Lords amendments. I trust that we will reject all the Lords amendments that the Government oppose and that we will support the Government amendments.

Dawn Butler: We have just heard about the land held by TfL, and Labour Members are seeking guarantees that houses built on TfL land will be properly affordable for people living in London. There is only one person who has guaranteed that that will be the case: my right hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan). If the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) wants to ensure that affordable houses are built on TfL land, I recommend that he votes for my right hon. Friend on Thursday.

Chris Philip: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dawn Butler: I will not give way now as I want to get into my stride.

7.30 pm

My hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and I were in the Members’ Tea Room not long ago exchanging really sad stories about our constituents. It was heartbreaking for us to share those housing stories. More than anyone else on the Opposition Benches, we need to ensure that the Bill is right for our constituents in London.

At the moment, the Bill is a disaster for London. It redefines affordable housing to include starter homes, the price cap for which, at the moment, is set at £450,000. I will explain how that affects my constituents in Brent Central. Twenty per cent. of £450,000 is £90,000, which
brings the rough cost of starter homes in Brent down to £360,000. If a mortgage for £360,000 with an interest rate of 3.92% is to be repaid over 25 years, that means a payment of £1,884 per month. The median household income in Brent is £31,601, and an individual earning that amount will bring home £2,054.66 a month after tax. That means that the average person in my constituency would have to spend 91.6% of their entire average income on mortgage repayments, which is most definitely not affordable. The independent housing charity Shelter estimates—we have heard this before—that Londoners need £77,000 a year to afford a starter home. The Bill hits London councils the hardest, and essentially hollows out the capital.

The Lords amended the Bill to guarantee that when council homes are sold, local authorities will be able to replace them with new homes for social rent in local areas—for doctors, nurses, teachers, and everyone who is working and earning an average wage in London. That puts into practice the principle behind the amendment tabled last year by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tooting. The Khan amendment set out that if a home for social rent is sold off, it must be replaced by a new home for rent in the same area. That is important, because otherwise we are socially cleansing certain areas, which is wrong. We have heard the arguments many times, and sometimes speeches from Government Members sound very muddled. We need to trust local authorities to know their need when it comes to providing housing for the local area.

All Members must support that principle if they are serious about protecting London’s great mix of people across our city. We need to protect the doctors, the nurses, the teachers, the shop workers and the cleaners to make sure that we have the diverse London that won us the Olympics of which we are so proud.

I will not speak for much longer, but I want to say that selling off high-value council homes makes no sense. In Brent, it will mean that we sell off more than 70 family homes a year. Are we saying that people should not have large families? Thank the Lord, I say, with regard to the Lords amendments; I hope that the Minister and Conservative Members will accept them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chloe Smith: I will speak specifically against Lords amendment 54. Local authorities should not have local discretion to apply pay to stay. I will raise a very clear example that shows the worst possible risk of local self-interest.

Norwich City Council. I am sorry to report, is led by Labour, although we have elections on Thursday. The Norwich Labour party may be having a rather difficult week—the leader of the Labour party is no doubt right now looking into reported extreme tweets from the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis).

The leader of Norwich City Council himself, Councillor Alan Waters, lives in one of his own council homes. In fact, he is not alone in doing so. So many Labour councillors on Norwich City Council live in their own council housing that they cannot even recuse themselves from business relating to their pecuniary interest, as clearly laid out in the standards expected of councillors; in response to my investigations on this topic, a city council spokesman confirmed in March that so many councillors were taking advantage of their own housing that the political balance of the council would be affected if all tenants took no part in discussions about housing policy. That means that councillors are being allowed to take part in discussions about council housing even though they have personal financial interests in it.

More specifically, the leader of the council is himself likely to be a high-income tenant under the terms of the Bill. His own register of interests at City Hall clearly shows that as well as living in one of his own Norwich City Council houses, he holds a professional job in London and Norwich and a directorship, all while earning well over many people’s minimum wage from council expenses alone. Of course the leader of Norwich City Council will not want higher earning tenants to pay a fairer rent, because he is likely to be one of them. If his Labour friends in the Lords were to get away with letting councils have discretion over the policy, of course he would not enact it in Norwich.

The policy should be enacted because it means that better-off tenants will pay their way—or, indeed, move out to allow poorer families who really need a council home to have it. There are thousands of families in Norwich on the housing waiting list. Those who argue against the policy seem to believe that if people living in council housing earn a bit more, they should not pay a bit more in rent, and that people on any amount of money should be able to continue to live in public housing, subsidised by the taxpayer. People might remember that union baron Bob Crow lived in a council house until he died, yet reportedly earned £145,000.

I simply do not think it is right for the struggling family who really need that home to be denied a place because a well-off person has it. That is why I support the Bill, as a Norwich MP who wants people to be able fairly to get the homes they dearly need, and why I am speaking against Lords amendment 54.

Bob Blackman: My hon. Friend has jogged my memory. Unfortunately, I forgot to declare my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and draw it to the attention of the House. May I use this opportunity to correct the record?

Chloe Smith: I welcome my hon. Friend’s doing so, because it shows the kind of principles that we should uphold in public life. We seek integrity and honesty in public life. That goes to the heart of my point. It is particularly hypocritical and wrong if a local council leader opposes this policy while standing to gain personally from doing so.

Mr Jackson: My hon. Friend is making a very strong case. Does she remember the time, not that long ago—about half a dozen years—when the Labour party was on the side of working people and was considering reforms of lifetime tenancies of council houses? Now, for purely political reasons, it is not on the side of working people but, for electoral reasons, on the side of people who support the Labour party. That is why it opposes this policy.
Chloe Smith: I welcome that reminder from my hon. Friend. Like him, I urge people to vote Conservative in city council elections this week, because on the one side we have self-interest, and on the other the principles of public office. Those principles are very clear: council leaders should, like all of us, be upholding integrity, accountability and honesty in public office.

The people of Norwich deserve higher standards of integrity from the leader of our council, rather than a strong smell of self-interest and personal gain. The thousands of people in Norwich on the housing waiting list deserve better. People across the country deserve better than a watered-down pay to stay that could allow local weakness to stand in the way of right and wrong. I urge hon. Members to join me in opposing Lords amendment 54, and to uphold the right thing to do by asking those who are better off to pay accordingly.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak, because I know that many other Members wish to. I will therefore not take any interventions.

The Government’s own figures show that rough sleeping has increased by 30% over the past year, and it has almost doubled since they came to power back in 2010. The Mayor of London promised to tackle homelessness in the capital, but it has doubled over his period in City Hall. The Combined Homelessness and Information Network found that there are 7,500 rough sleepers on London’s streets alone. Councils are spending a staggering £623,000 every single day on temporary bed and breakfast accommodation just to put a roof over the heads of vulnerable families. That equates to £227.5 million last year, a rise of over £60 million on the previous year. The overwhelming majority of that money—some £176 million—was spent in London; 10% of the total figure—some £20 million—was spent in my home borough, the London borough of Haringey.

We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who chairs the Public Accounts Committee, which has looked into the extension of the right to buy. Its report makes sobering reading. The Government have not published a proper impact assessment on the full extent of the right to buy. In fact, my hon. Friend said:

“The Government should be embarrassed by the findings of this Report.”

I could not agree more.

I ask the Government why they are planning to push through changes that would reduce social housing stock by 370,000 by 2020. That figure is not from the Labour party; it is from the Chartered Institute of Housing. Why are they proposing to push that through? Is it to fund the fire sale of yet more council homes on the private market in order to pay for these short-sighted reforms. Those council homes should be going to families on the capital’s waiting lists, but instead they are being sold to private buyers. For what reason? Is it to fund the fire sale of yet more council properties to tenants at a discount rate under the right to buy? It just does not make sense. I am putting on my best Conservative hat and trying to understand it, but I am struggling—usually I can just about get there, but I cannot on this occasion. I am really looking forward to hearing the Minister explain this.

Last month I asked the Minister what steps his Department is taking to ensure that replacements under the replacement housing scheme will be provided. He told me that “housing associations will have the flexibility to replace nationally.”

He has repeated that line today, but the House has pressed him for detail. He is an educated man, so can we get into the detail, because this is important stuff that we are being asked to see through? He has been asked for detail by the Public Accounts Committee and its Chair, but we have heard absolutely none. When there is no detail, as this House knows from experience, it is usually because it has been done on the back of an envelope. We will be back here in a few years’ time to tidy up this mess—when I say “we”, I mean the House as a whole. Where is the detail? We need to hear more about what flexibility he actually means.

In London there were just 4,881 affordable homes built last year, which is the lowest number since 2008. How will this Bill make that any better? It will not, and that is why we oppose it.
Ben Howlett: I will try to be a little more sober in my approach to this debate. It is a privilege to be able to speak in favour of the Bill. As Members across the House will know, I have raised my concerns about the high cost of housing in my constituency and other high-value areas on multiple occasions, and I have been supportive of the Government’s plans to build 400,000 affordable homes by 2020-21. Starter homes will make a massive impact in the west of England, enabling young families—and indeed families who are not young—to get on the property ladder. I think that is an incredibly important story to tell. I join other Members across the House who have talked about the importance of the housing debate, not just in London, but in other high-value areas throughout the UK.

I am fortunate enough to have got myself on the property ladder a little bit younger than the average age, aged 29, but that was only because my other half and I were able to combine our earnings in order to afford a two-bedroom house worth £450,000. I have a huge amount of respect for the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), and not just because I went to Durham University and one of the first elections I campaigned in was in her constituency—sadly, we did not win, but we did get rid of those Liberal Democrats, as we managed to do in Bath as well. But I take umbrage with the Labour party on this point, because if a two-bedroom home that costs £450,000 is good enough not to do anything, frankly, I do not think that is an argument that will wash very well with her constituents; it certainly would not wash with any of our constituents.

I am confident that the Bill, which we have now been debating for months, will go some way towards helping Bath residents access the housing ladder. During an earlier stage of our consideration of the Bill I joined several other Government Members, as the Minister has said, in calling for more to be done to increase the amount of affordable housing in high-value areas outside the capital, including Oxford, Winchester, Truro and Bath. Those are all beautiful places, so it is understandable that demand for houses there is very high. In such areas it is often young, aspiring homeowners who do not have the chance to buy, especially when they do not have the financial support of a relative. I do not want those groups to be put off moving to those areas and ultimately staying there, simply because they could not find a deposit. That has a major impact on economies outside London that are desperate for houses to be built to ensure they have the workers to maintain their economic growth. The west of England has increased its growth rate substantially over the past five years, as a result of the Government’s economic policies, but without housing integrated into the equation, we cannot maintain that.

I thank the Minister for taking the time to meet fellow MPs to discuss this issue and for taking our views into consideration. I agree with him that one answer to the problem is to increase the housing stock in higher-value areas. After talks with him, I am pleased to see the Government amendment changing “higher” to “high”, which will allow them the flexibility to ensure that areas with the highest-value housing are not unfairly impacted. That will have a major impact on the flexibility local authorities have to deliver more homes. I am also pleased that the Government have listened to our concerns and ensured that for every home a local authority agrees to sell, at least one new affordable home will be provided. Such measures will increase our housing stock and allow more young people to access the housing ladder. It also suggests that the Minister has listened to the concerns of the past and produced sensible proposals to ensure that housing is built rather than lost.

I applaud the Government for taking those important steps, but they will need, sadly, increase the housing stock in Bath, where the local authority has already taken steps to sell vacant high-value housing, having sold off a lot of homes for social housing. I therefore welcome what the Minister said earlier and call on Bath and North East Somerset Council to work with fellow councils, such as Wiltshire, Somerset and South Gloucestershire, to bid for the £1.2 billion and other funds available to deliver more homes for our areas. I look forward to working with the Minister, I hope, to see how our authority can put that into practice.

Bob Blackman: Is not one problem in this debate that a property will be sold for a certain value—the open-market value less the discount—but that the cost of building a home is normally much less? That great benefit could be used for new housing.

Ben Howlett: I completely agree. The sale of one high-value asset in a high-value area, such as Oxford, could enable more than just one new home to be built, because it costs a lot less to build, particularly given the current style of building adopted in some cities to keep up with demand. That is learning the lessons of the problems in the 1980s when these things were not taken into consideration, and it is thus another reason to back the Government’s proposals and not to listen to the wrecking amendments from the Lords.

I look forward to the housing revolution by 2020, and I hope that the House will reject the wrecking amendments from the House of Lords and back the Government on this vital Bill.

Tom Brake: I am a member of Sutton Housing Society Ltd, although I have no pecuniary interest.

I will start where the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee finished, on the issue of supply. The Bill should be about supply in the widest sense, but while I do not doubt that Ministers are seeking to solve housing problems for some, I am afraid that the Bill will do nothing for the people I see regularly in my constituency surgeries. Nothing in it will help the single mother I referred to earlier, living and working in London on £17,000 a year and seeking a better private rented property or social housing through a housing association. Nor will it help the couple I saw a few months ago in a two-bedroom flat with three children, who could not afford the rent in a housing association property, let alone afford to buy in London.

We have heard about the Khan amendments, but perhaps I could throw in the Caroline Pidgeon amendments, which unfortunately do not feature in any of the strings today. The advantage of her proposal for London is that it includes a revenue stream of £2 billion to deliver the housing. Many have said they will deliver housing, but in practice we are still hundreds of thousands of properties short.

The Bill has been subject to an extraordinary number of amendments and no fewer than 13 Government defeats in the Lords, which is testimony to the fact that
the Bill was presented to the House lacking a huge amount of detail and clarity. I thought we might get some here but that has not, I am afraid, been the case. The Bill contains provisions that will have extremely concerning consequences for housing in the UK and affordable housing in particular, and the fact that there has been such united cross-party opposition to the Bill in the Lords, including from Cross Benchers, indicates the depth of concern.

The Bill's focus is on home ownership for better-off renters, but it neglects affordable homes to rent and clearly seeks to reduce the number of social homes provided by local authorities. As Opposition Members have said, the impact will undoubtedly be a rise in homelessness. Furthermore, far too much is being imposed on local authorities, in terms of sales of higher-value council homes, pay to stay and secure tenancies. It is encouraging, however, that the Government have taken on board some of the serious concerns and made concessions in relation to amendments 26 to 36, on abandonment, and amendments 90 and 91, on mandatory electrical safety checks for private tenants. Those are welcome.

I also welcome the Government’s recent inclusion in the Bill of a commitment to replace all homes sold off under the sale of higher-value properties. Replacements are critical to whether the Bill will have a devastating impact on social housing. In the past, promises of replacement have been made but not delivered, and as several Members have mentioned, it is critical that the replacement is like for like, in terms of the type of property, and in the same area.

In London, pay to stay is of particular concern. Some Members might be aware of a report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2014 that found that a family of two adults and two children needed an income of £40,000 to have an acceptable standard of living. That was an average across the whole country. Given that that was two years ago and an average for the country as a whole, it is clear that families on £40,000 in London would not be wealthy. I hope that the Government will look favourably on amendment 57, which would raise the threshold by £10,000 and might actually get people up to an acceptable standard of living before their income is reduced by rising rents in their social property. In addition, I will certainly support amendment 55, if it is pressed to a vote, and amendment 54. If they are pressed, I will also support amendments 9 and 47, which were debated earlier.

With that and within your five-minute margin, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will sit down.

James Cartlidge: I start by declaring my housing interests in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. They include a significant involvement in shared ownership, which it is almost impossible not to speak about in such a debate.

I want to focus on starter homes, on how they interact with other affordable home ownership products and, more importantly, on how they will affect my constituents. I am intrigued by the idea, in amendment 1, that someone would repay the 20% discount over 20 years. It is unclear how it would work in practice—I apologise for not having studied the Lords Hansard for a lengthy explanation. Would the money be repaid on the sale of the property only, or would it be a credit agreement repaid annually? If, on the sale of a property, someone’s circumstances had worsened or they were unemployed—people sell their properties when their circumstances change—would they still have to repay the equity discount from which they had benefited? We must remember that whenever we add complexity to a home ownership product, lenders do not like it and are less likely to be involved. I make that impartial observation as a former mortgage broker.

My other point about amendment 1 is that we must remember that it is relatively unprecedented in affordable home ownership products to have repayment of the subsidy from which the homeowner has benefited. With shared ownership, grant is implicit, but when someone sells their share, they do not repay the part that came from the Government grant. They have become a homeowner, and they benefit or otherwise from the increase in the value of the share.

Under the Labour Government, there was a product called “price discount covenant”, and I remember dealing with it when I was a broker. There was a perpetual discount there, which meant that there was less of an argument about whether it should be repaid. The problem was that mortgage lenders do not like perpetual discounts, and there were only two active lenders, who required a much higher deposit than would otherwise have been the case.

We do have equity loan products. The largest scheme for funding home ownership at the moment is an equity loans scheme, whereby people receive a loan for a 20% deposit, and with their own 5% deposit, they can buy a 75% loan to value on a new-build property. The beauty of the discount scheme, as I understand it, is that it does not include an equity loan; it is paid for by taking affordable housing allocations on a development through a section 106 agreement. In that sense, it is an eminently sensible policy.

Probably the most important amendment on starter homes for Conservative Members is Lords amendment 9. It looks very innocent:

“An English planning authority may only grant planning permission for a residential development having had regard to the provision of starter homes based on its own assessment of local housing need and viability.”

I can understand why Labour Members, including the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Select Committee Chairman, would want more clarity on how starter homes will mix with other affordable housing tenures. To that extent, we might say that we can understand why the amendment was tabled. Government Members, however, ask ourselves whether it is because of some commitment to localism and giving local areas a say, or is it because their Lordships do not like the idea of starter homes, and this is a wrecking amendment, which would mean that many councils would ensure that these schemes never saw the light of day. That is our concern, and it is why I believe that most of my hon. Friends are likely to vote against the amendment.

The interaction of starter homes with other products is important. The most extraordinary point that I have heard in the debate is the criticism of the affordability
of a starter home. By definition, it is singularly the most affordable product. Let me explain why. I have had a lot of experience with shared ownership, so I know it is a good and sustainable product that has lasted a long time. With a shared ownership property, people buy a share and put down a deposit in respect of it. They are tenants, engaged in a process of “part buy, part rent” – a stepping stone towards full ownership. Here is the key point. The person pays the market price for the property. Yes, they buy a share in it, but the full market price is paid in total.

As part of my business interests I used to run a website in conjunction with the Greater London Authority, which displayed all the shared ownership properties in London. I can tell Members that the average price is £450,000. In places such as Notting Hill, shared ownership properties have been re-sold at £800,000 or £900,000. We have received emails, saying “This isn’t an affordable housing website because these properties are £600,000 or £700,000”, but that is not the point. Shared ownership does not affect the market price. The property is still sold at the prevailing market price. It simply provides a mechanism to pay a lower deposit.

I see that you are calling me to conclude, Mr Deputy Speaker, so let me finish with one final point—an extraordinary statistic—about South Suffolk. It is predicted that by 2035, there will be 4,000 more people in the starter-home age bracket in my constituency—aged 25 to 39—while there will be 84,000 more people aged 65 to 75. As I say, it is an incredible statistic. I return to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan)—that the most important benefit from starter homes is that it will encourage more young people to remain in constituencies such as South Suffolk and will attract people in that age bracket so that we can make our communities more sustainable.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I congratulate their Lordships on their meticulous and effective scrutiny of the Housing and Planning Bill and on their staunch opposition to many of its most damaging provisions. Having heard the Government response, I see that what remains is an ideological commitment to the undermining of social and genuinely affordable housing, which flies in the face of evidence from across the housing sector; and a package of measures that will fail to deliver for my constituents and for people across the country the solutions to the housing crisis that they so desperately need.

There is a universal consensus that starter homes will be of no use to people on median incomes in most areas of the country, and particularly in London, and that the very strong obligations on councils to deliver starter homes will undermine their ability both to deliver genuinely affordable homes and to meet local housing needs. Councils will see their waiting lists grow, while scarce valuable land will be used up delivering homes that very few can afford. Home ownership will not grow in the way that Members on both sides of the House would like to see it grow, while too many people are spending too high a proportion of their income on rent and letting agents fees in the private sector to be able to save for a deposit.

It is therefore extremely disappointing that the Government are refusing to accept Lords amendment 9, which would allow councils to decide how many starter homes are built, based on their own assessment of local housing need. It is astonishing that in their ideological commitment to starter homes, the Government are prepared to override the detailed local knowledge of councils and their ability to respond best to what their local communities need.

It is also disappointing that the Government are refusing to accept Lords amendment 47, which would allow councils to retain the receipts from the forced sale of higher value council homes to provide new homes of a tenure that is in demand locally. Without this amendment, there is no guarantee that homes built to replace those sold under right to buy or forced sale will be of the same tenure, or indeed in the same area, and this will have a devastating impact on the social mix and economy of London in particular, and in many other areas.

The abolition of secure tenancies is deeply concerning. I welcome the extension of the maximum length of a social tenancy from five to 10, and the introduction of some protection for families with children, but I continue to question the principle of the abolition of secure tenancies. People on lower incomes aspire just as much to a secure home as those who can afford to raise a mortgage. I remain concerned that fixed-term tenancies of 10 years simply postpone the anxiety that will surround the ending of the tenancy.

A tenancy review for families with grown-up children presents the very real prospect that adult children may no longer be accepted as a legitimate part of the household for any new tenancy for the purposes of a housing needs assessment. Where would our young adults go then? It would be far better if the Government accepted the benefits of secure tenancies for families and communities, and removed this damaging measure from the Bill.

I remain concerned about the pay-to-stay provisions, which are a further attack on hard-working tenants—a tax on aspiration and achievement. I recently heard from a constituent who had lived with her partner and children in a council home for 14 years. She wrote:

“You see, our joint income for 2015-2016 is estimated to be £38,000. That’s with me working part time and my partner working full time. I intend to work full time from September 2016. If I do then our income will be over £40,000—the government have decided I will have to pay market value rent. I’m sickened at the idea of having to move as there is no way we can pay that level of rent. We don’t have any savings so we are in no position to even contemplate getting a mortgage.”

How can the Government justify legislation that will have such pervasive and damaging consequences?

Let me turn now to the elephant in the room. The single biggest cause of homelessness is now the ending of a private tenancy, yet this Bill does absolutely nothing to improve either security of tenure or affordability for the millions of people living in the private rented sector. I have been contacted by 50 constituents since the beginning of January—more than two a week—who are facing homelessness, the vast majority of them in the private rented sector. Residents whose private tenancy comes to an end are increasingly ending up in temporary accommodation at great financial cost to the public sector and great personal cost to the residents and their children, who often end up a long way from their children’s schools, in overcrowded accommodation, too often sharing kitchens and bathrooms with strangers.
In the London Borough of Lambeth alone, there are 5,000 children living in temporary accommodation—more than in the entire city of Birmingham in a single London borough. The Housing and Planning Bill entirely ignores the plight of these families. It will make it harder for them to access a genuinely affordable home to rent; impossible for them to access a secure tenancy; and offers no hope that their family’s next private tenancy will have any more security than the last. How can the Government introduce major housing legislation that ignores the single biggest cause of homelessness?

The housing crisis has become all-pervading. It is already affecting London’s public services, with schools and the NHS finding it difficult to recruit suitably qualified and experienced staff, and it is affecting London’s economy, as the workforce our city needs cannot afford to live here. This Bill will make the situation worse.

We are debating this Bill during a week when Londoners will vote for our next Mayor. We need a Mayor who will stand up for Londoners who are unable to afford a secure home to rent or to buy. We need a Mayor who will make good use of publicly owned land to deliver genuinely affordable homes. We need a Mayor who will stand up for Londoners against a Government who are determined to divide our city, undermine our diversity and make it a place where only the wealthy can afford to live. I look forward to seeing my right hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan) doing just that in two days’ time.

Kevin Hollinrake: Opposition Members have made the point that starter homes will be built, rather than affordable homes to rent. That is, of course, true to some extent, because people want to buy homes and people on lower incomes have been excluded from the housing market for too long. We have been building an average of 50,000 affordable homes to rent for the last 20 years. Why have we not been building more affordable houses for sale, if that is what people want? Given that we have 20 years of catching up to do, it is absolutely right for the Government to set the ambitious target of building 200,000 starter homes over the next four years.

The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) gave the example of someone who will have earned £40,000 by the end of this year and is living in an affordable rented property. The average price of a London home for a first-time buyer is £250,000. I believe that, under this policy, a starter home in London could be built for about £200,000. The information provided by Shelter about the unaffordability of starter homes in most local authority areas is flawed, or deliberately misleading, because it is based on the median house price. First-time buyers buy at around 25% below the median house price, and in my area, the average house price for first-time buyers in Greater London is £250,000. In my area the average house price is more than £200,000, but we have some very nice villages in which the average is £300,000. First-time buyers will pay about £150,000, and will move a few miles away from those nice villages to buy in a more affordable area. If they can buy at 20% below that value, they will pay £120,000. Bringing property for home ownership within the reach of many more people is absolutely the right thing to do, and this policy is clearly very popular with first-time buyers.

Victoria Borwick: Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the fact that, over the last eight years, the current Mayor of London has built more than 100,000 affordable homes? Moreover, the public land database established by the London Land Commission, supported by the Chancellor, will reveal that there is space for another 400,000 homes on brownfield sites. It will show that not only the Transport for London land that was mentioned earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) but other public land will be publicly available to enable the next Mayor—who we hope will be my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith)—to deal with the housing crisis.

Kevin Hollinrake: I welcome the building of properties for all tenures, because lack of supply is at the heart of the big issues that affect the housing market.

This policy is also popular with local residents. If there are to be new developments in their areas, they want to see properties that local people can afford. There is a feeling that people in affordable properties for rent may have no connection with the area. People who buy affordable homes are much more likely to have that local connection and commitment, so I welcome the Government’s proposals.

Of course we need to ensure that properties are delivered for all types of tenure, and I am convinced that that will happen. The Government are consulting on the proposal that about 20% of a development of 10 units or more should be for starter homes. The average number of affordable homes on a site is more like 35%, so there will be room for affordable homes to rent as well. It will clearly not be possible to achieve the 20% target in some cases for reasons of viability or because other kinds of development have been allowed, so I hope the Government will consider whether allowing a percentage of the affordable homes on that development to be starter homes might be more appropriate, but we certainly want to increase the number of properties being built. I believe that that objective is at the heart of the Bill, and I shall enjoy walking through the Lobbies this evening to support the Government.

Catherine West: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake).

I shall be brief, because I know that the hour of the vote is upon us, but I could not resist speaking. Since I was elected a year ago, 1,300 people have come to my advice surgery or have contacted me, and 60% of complaints have been about housing. People have wanted to get on to the housing ladder, have been party to unsatisfactory private rental agreements, or have desperately needed a social home.
...
I want to make a short speech to outline some important issues. Conservative Members feel strongly that we want to return the Bill to the other place with the clear message that we want more homes to be built, not fewer; more homeowners, not fewer; and progress on increasing our housing supply. Let me put this in context by quoting from our manifesto, which resulted in our being given a mandate at the general election. It stated:

“The chance to own your own home should be available to everyone who works hard...We will...build more homes that people can afford, including 200,000 new Starter Homes...for first-time buyers under the age of 40...We will give more people the chance to own their own home by extending the Right to Buy to tenants of Housing Associations...We will fund the replacement of properties sold under the extended Right to Buy by requiring local authorities to manage their housing assets more efficiently, with the most expensive properties sold off and replaced as they fall vacant.”

That is a direct quote from our election manifesto, and it is a promise to the people of Great Britain that we intend to keep. We also feel strongly that the Houses of Parliament should respect our mandate.

Let us also consider this in the context of the work we have been doing, which the Bill will take further—

[Interruption.] The number of new homes delivered in the past year was not as low as it was under the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey)—he did not find this debate important enough to speak in, other than from a sedentary position—when it was just 88,000. The number of new homes delivered last year was up by 25% on the previous year, thanks to the work that we have done, and 181,000 new homes were built. Housing construction orders have doubled since 2009 and registrations are at their highest level since 2007. In fact, new housing registrations have increased in England more than three times as much as in Labour-run Wales. That gives us a clue about what Labour is doing for housing, and we as a Government are determined to go further.

When the House was asked to give the Bill a Second Reading, it delivered one of the largest majorities in this Session. That is why we believe it is important that we see more progress on delivering on the contract that we now have with the British people, who want more homes that they can afford to buy, as well as an overall increase in supply. The House once again has an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to helping those who work hard to achieve their dream of home ownership. We are a Government of aspiration and opportunity, and we are getting Britain building again.

We are delivering on our promises and we will continue to deliver on our contract with every person in this country that results from the mandate that they gave us. They gave us a mandate to deliver fair social rents through our first Conservative Budget in 19 years. They also gave us a mandate to deliver the ground-breaking Bill that we are discussing today. I am proud to be here today to enable us to go further with a Bill that will deliver more homes for our country.

8.27 pm

Three hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments, the debate was interrupted (Programme Order, this day.)

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83F), That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1. Question agreed to.

Lords amendment 1 accordingly disagreed to.

The Deputy Speaker then put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83F).

Government amendments (a) to (c) made in lieu of Lords amendment 1.

Government amendment (a) made to Lords amendment 184.

Lords amendment 184, as amended, agreed to, with Commons financial privilege waived.

Clause 4

Planning permission: provision of starter homes

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 9.—(Brandon Lewis.)

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I must remind the House that the motion relates exclusively to England. A double majority is therefore required.

The House having divided: Ayes 287, Noes 172.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England:

Ayes 279, Noes 158.

Division No. 258

[8.28 pm]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Carmichael, Neil
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Housing and Planning Bill

3 MAY 2016

Housing and Planning Bill

Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Haris, Rebecca
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heappye, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hinds, Damian
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Lewis, Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Luney, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCarty, Jason
McCarty, Karl
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, John
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Millin, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Nokes, Caroline
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Perry, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pritchard, Mark
Purgoove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sheb Joe, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, lain
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Suni, Rishi
Swiny, rh Mr Desmond
Symes, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tothurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevathan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shaiash
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, rh Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warm, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Whatton, James
Whatley, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittacker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:

George Hollingbery and Sarah Newton

NOES

Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Campbell, Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Question accordingly agreed to.
Lords amendment 9 disagreed to.
Lords amendment 10 disagreed to.
Government amendment (a) made in lieu of Lords amendments 9 and 10.
Lords amendment 37 disagreed to.

Clause 72

REDUCTION OF PAYMENT BY AGREEMENT

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 47.—(Brandon Lewis.) The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I remind the House that the motion relates exclusively to England. A double majority is therefore required.

The House having divided: Ayes 288, Noes 172.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England: Ayes 279, Noes 158.

Division No. 259

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenhurst, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Carmichael, Neil
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William

Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Elwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evans, Mr Jeremy
Evernett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mr Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justin
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hallon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hinds, Damian
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennrick, Robert
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kacwczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Lewis, Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, John
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Murray, Mrs Sherryl
Murison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Nokes, Caroline
Nutall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Payawse, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Shebbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Symes, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Anderson, Mr David
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sarah Newton and
George Hollingbery

NOES
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
De Piero, Gloria
Dowd, Jim
Dromey, Jack
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Gapes, Mike
Glass, Pat
Gladwin, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Gwynne, Andrew
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Heburn, Mr Stephen
Heron, Lady
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Khan, rh Sadiq
Kinncok, Stephen
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marrs, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian
Milband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morris, Grahame M.
Muholland, Greg
Onn, Melanie
Onwaru, Chai
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Rees, Christina
Rimmer, Marie
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, rh Joan
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Stevens, Jo
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Turley, Anna
Twigg, Stephen
Umnuna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Holly Lynch and
Jeff Smith

Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Carmichael, Neil
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evatt, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Halic, Luke
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harriington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hinds, Damian
Hollinsake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrew
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynska, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon

Question accordingly agreed to.
Lords amendment 47 disagreed to.

Clause 78

MANDATORY RENTS FOR HIGH INCOME LOCAL AUTHORITY TENANTS

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 54.—(Brandon Lewis.)

The House divided: Ayes 286, Noes 171.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England:
Ayes 278, Noes 157.

Division No. 260] [8.57 pm]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Arger, Edward

AYES

Addison, Kate
Aldous, Peter
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Arger, Edward

Housing and Planning Bill

3 MAY 2016

Housing and Planning Bill
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<td>Cunningham, rh Mr Jim</td>
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<td>Godsilf, Mr Roger</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hamilton, Fabian</td>
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<td>Hanson, rh Mr David</td>
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Twigg, Stephen  
Umunna, Mr Chuka  
Vaz, Rh Keith  
Vaz, Valerie  
West, Catherine  
Whitehead, Dr Alan  
Wilson, Phil  
Winnick, Mr David  
Winterton, Rh Dame Rosie  
Wright, Mr Iain  
Zeichner, Daniel  

Tellers for the Noes:  
Holly Lynch and  
Jeff Smith  

Question accordingly agreed to.  
Lords amendment 54 disagreed to.  
Lords amendments 55, 57 and 58 disagreed to.  

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must now put the Questions necessary to dispose of the remaining Lords amendments in the group. First, under the Standing Order, I must put the Question on the Lords amendments that relate exclusively to England.  
Lords amendments 2 to 8, 11 to 36, 38 to 46, 48 to 53, 56, 59, 60, 88 to 96, 197 to 199 and 215 to 239 agreed to, with Commons financial privilege waived in respect of Lords amendments 38 to 46, 48 to 53, 56 and 91.  

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must now put the Question on the remaining Lords amendments that have not been certified.  
Lords amendments 61 to 87, 182, 183, 185 to 188, 190, 191, 195, 196 and 200 to 214 agreed to, with Commons financial privilege waived in respect of Lords amendment 185.  

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Lords amendments 92 and 93 were moved by Lord Young of Cookham with the understanding of the Government. Amendment 92 deals, it says, with tenants—in fact, it is leaseholders—and amendment 93 deals with leaseholders in a commonhold agreement. Am I right in saying that they give powers to Government to propose to Parliament statutory instruments, which we can consider separately?  

Mr Deputy Speaker: As a man who has been here longer than most, you will know that that is not for the Chair to interpret.  

After Clause 128  

NEIGHBOURHOOD RIGHT OF APPEAL  

Brandon Lewis: I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 97.  

Mr Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to consider the following:  
Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 97.  
Lords amendment 100.  

Lords amendment 108, and Government motion to disagree.  
Lords amendment 109, and Government motion to disagree.  
Lords amendment 110, and Government motion to disagree.  
Lords amendment 98, 99 and 101 to 107.  
Lords amendment 111, and Government amendment (a) thereto.  
Lords amendments 112 to 181, 189, 192 to 194 and 240 to 282.  

Brandon Lewis: I will try to be brief, but I want to go through a few key areas in this group of amendments. If we are to build more houses, we need to make it as simple as we can do so, while supporting the key principles of local determination and empowerment. If we are to build new homes so that families and communities can grow, those communities need to be happy that they have a say and a voice. The more red tape there is and the more spanners there are in the system, the more the system grinds to a creaking halt, and we end up in the mess that we are trying to fix—the mess that we inherited.  

As we have made clear, decisions on planning applications must be made in accordance with the development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. A neighbourhood plan brought into legal force is part of the development plan and must be the starting point for authorities’ decisions on applications. I want to be very clear that neighbourhood plans have weight in law. I am exceptionally proud of neighbourhood planning, as, I expect, is every Member of this House who has seen their community take the lead in deciding the future development of their area—deciding where new homes and businesses should go, what they should look like and what local infrastructure is needed.  

Putting planning power in the hands of local people involves the whole community, from plan drafting to referendum stages. Local support for house building in such areas has doubled, and opposition has halved. I have spoken to people who are excited about the prospect of new homes, schools for their children as they grow older and the opportunity to have their say about how their towns and villages should grow.  

Neighbourhood plans are clear evidence of our belief that decisions about community life should be taken by those communities. We can and should trust communities to make those decisions. We do only half our job if neighbourhood plans are there, but in name only. If people have exercised their right to be heard about where new homes should go, and if a group has put time and effort into doing so, I believe it is only right that the local planning authority should take notice, although I am not inclined to support Lords amendment 97 as the best way to achieve that. I am sympathetic to it—of course I am—but even in a limited form, a neighbourhood right of appeal could affect housing supply and reduce confidence in the system.  

Neighbourhood plans have weight in law, and I want to make sure that we keep the spirit of the amendment and maintain that confidence. There is no stronger position for a community to hold than to have an
up-to-date neighbourhood plan in place. I believe that communities should have the reassignment that, after they have taken the time and effort to get involved, there will be additional safeguards in place to ensure that they are listened to.

Antoinette Sandbach (Edisbury) (Con): The Minister will be aware that in a number of areas where neighbourhood plans have been adopted, those plans are repeatedly challenged by developers making planning applications against them. Does the Minister agree that we need to look at that and tighten up the safeguards around neighbourhood planning?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. She is absolutely right that there have been examples of developers having a go at getting a planning application. That is why it is important that we are very clear that where a neighbourhood plan outlines where housing should be, it should be respected by the local authority. As I said in response to a very similar point, it should also be respected by planning inspectors and by us in the Government.

That is why amendment (a), which I propose to return to the other place in lieu of Lords amendment 97, will ensure that neighbourhood plans are fully taken into account. It will introduce into the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 a requirement for local planning authorities to identify, in their reports to planning committees, how the neighbourhood plan was taken into account in making a recommendation to grant planning permission. They will also be required to identify in the report any points of conflict between their recommendation and the neighbourhood plan. This will ensure absolute transparency in the decision-making process and that the balance of considerations is made clear.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): The Minister makes an extremely good point. I am pleased that he is introducing such a new clause. However, my concern is that it does not really go far enough. The only redress is to call in the decision, which means that it will not be made by the community, which the Minister has said we should trust. I am very pleased that he is going as far as he is, but if he believes in trusting the community, the original Lords amendment is a much better way to go.

Brandon Lewis: I know that my hon. Friend has joined colleagues in making it clear that they want us to look at how we can go further to make sure that neighbourhood plans have precedence and that everybody is very clear about central Government’s view that neighbourhood plans should guide planning. I will reflect on that and work with colleagues in the period ahead. We are determined to make sure that the message is that neighbourhood plans are the way for communities to come together, that the time they spend together will be valuable in giving them control and power over planning and that that will have weight in law. I am very happy to continue to do that.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Minister is making a good case for neighbourhood plans, although I am personally more sympathetic to the amendment, as he well knows from the ten-minute rule Bill I proposed on the subject last year. Does he accept that communities find it difficult to get the resources together to produce a neighbourhood plan and will he consider what additional help might be forthcoming?
Brandon Lewis: I am happy to outline that there is additional help out there. We give money to local areas to do their neighbourhood plans, and to local authorities to support them in that work. We will continue to do that. I am always looking at more ways not just of promoting plans but of making sure that communities have the support that they need, from a wide network, including templates and other work.

We are tight on time, so I will move on. As I said earlier, the Government have listened. Permission in principle is a good example. Thanks to Lords amendment 100 the Bill now states explicitly that permission in principle can be granted only for housing-led development. We are happy to accept that amendment.

We are somewhat unconvinced, however, by amendment 108. It would increase the construction costs for home builders by an average of more than £3,000 on a semi-detached home, and place a regulatory burden of around £200 million a year on the industry. That will have an impact on all home builders—not just the big companies, but the small and medium-sized companies that we are looking to drive and help grow across England. We cannot accept the amendment. It would tip the balance, driving some small home builders out of the industry altogether and making housing development unviable in some areas. We already build some of the most energy-efficient homes in the world as a result of the tough building regulation standards we set in the last Parliament. In fact, there has been a 30% improvement on the standards before 2010, reducing energy bills by around £200 annually.

Tom Brake: Has the Minister attempted to calculate what homeowners would save each year in energy costs if the Government were to go for the enhanced standard?

Brandon Lewis: The right hon. Gentleman might want to reflect on the point I have just made about how we have reduced energy bills with that 30% improvement. We must balance that with the fact that a £3,000 increase in the cost of building a semi-detached home will lead to at least that increase—potentially even more—in the cost of buying one. That will not help home builders, and could slow down house building and make it harder for small businesses to come into the sector.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will the Minister assure us that he has given due consideration to our climate change commitments, as energy efficiency in homes really contributes to those?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. That is why we are so proud of the work that we have done on energy-efficient homes since 2010, raising those standards. But we have to be very clear on certain policy ideas. For example, the reason why we have said no to the reintroduction of zero-carbon homes has been well summed up by the Federation of Master Builders, which represents many of the small builders that we all want to see more of. It said that that policy “threatened to perpetuate the housing crisis.” This House should return any amendment that would do that.

Likewise, there are serious and fundamental reasons why amendment 110 is unworkable. I know many of us appreciate how important this issue is, so I will go through why for a few moments. Flood risk is an incredibly important issue, and I fully understand, sympathise with and share the strength of feeling on it. The Government are committed to ensuring that development is safe from flooding, and the delivery of sustainable drainage systems is part of our planning policy, which was strengthened just over one year ago.

Our planning policy and guidance are clear that local councils must consider strict tests that protect people and property from flooding, and that development should not be allowed where those tests are not met. Our approach to avoiding flood risk applies to all sources of flooding, including from surface water and from overloaded sewers and drainage systems, and it sets clear expectations for the use of sustainable drainage.

Rebecca Harris: I very much welcome what the Minister is saying. He will be aware of the problems we have had in Castle Point with surface water drainage, so I am grateful for his guidance to planning authorities. Does he agree that not incorporating Lords amendment 110 will mean that superb companies such as Anglian Water will struggle to deal not just with historical problems but with potential future problems, which could place a heavy burden on bill payers?

Brandon Lewis: I appreciate my hon. Friend’s point; indeed, I appreciate the intention behind Lords amendment 110. The Government are doing some work on this, and are reviewing how the new policy is working.

Rebecca Pow: Will the Minister give way?

Brandon Lewis: I will make a little progress, but I will take more interventions later.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Members want to get in, but they will not get in if they keep intervening. They have to choose which they want to do, and I will choose the ones who are not intervening.

Brandon Lewis: Lords amendment 110 seeks to remove an automatic right to connect to the public sewer for surface water, unless a sustainable drainage system forms part of a development and is constructed in accordance with non-statutory technical standards and the planning permission. However, the proposed new clause, as currently drafted, is unnecessary and unworkable. First, it makes the right to connect conditional on complying with the terms of a planning permission that may not actually provide for such a drainage system. That might be because it is not viable or because there are on-site constraints.

Secondly, the new clause presumes that a process exists that determines whether or not a development is permitted to connect to the public sewer, where there is none. Thirdly, making the right to connect conditional on planning permission leaves open a number of issues, including what happens when connections are needed and where there is currently no requirement for planning permission to be obtained at all. That might include situations where water sewerage companies are exercising their statutory obligations to drain an area effectively.

Finally, the new clause, which would increase red tape and barriers to development, has no transitional arrangements and industry, especially smaller house
builders, will struggle to respond without time to prepare, leading to delays in house building.

**Anne Marie Morris:** The Minister is being generous in giving way. I understand his concerns about the current proposal, but he assumes that the authorities will determine that the drainage and infrastructure in place are adequate. I have a number of examples where, in my view and that of the community, that is not the case. If there was a way of appealing those decisions if they are not robust, to say that the draining infrastructure was not appropriate, I would feel much happier with what he is saying.

**Brandon Lewis:** I appreciate my hon. Friend's point, but I say again that one of the problems with the proposed new clause is that, as currently drafted, there would sometimes be an issue where there is actually no requirement for planning permission to be obtained in the first place.

**Rebecca Pow:** I thank the Minister for giving way. I was going to save this point and make a short speech, but I will make my point now. In my constituency of Taunton Deane flooding is a massive issue, and of course the incorporation of SUDS—sustainable drainage systems—would help with wider catchment management, which in future we are all going to have to address, so would it not be sensible to think about doing it now? I do understand his concerns about discouraging house building, because I know that we have to build all these houses.

**Brandon Lewis:** My hon. Friend make a very good point, as have other colleagues across the Chamber this evening. I am very sympathetic to the points they have raised, which is why we are looking through this review to see how the current system is working, bearing in mind that it came in only a year ago and that it will be reporting back.

There is a theme emerging. I am proposing that this House should disagree with amendments that would increase burdens on house builders, would be unworkable for those building new homes and, like those in the previous group of amendments, would effectively slow the pace at which they can deliver them. That is also why the Government disagree with Lords amendment 109, which seeks to prevent the Secretary of State from using a power in relation to small sites and also in rural areas.

I want to make it clear that we are happy to work with the other place and to address the issues it raises about rural areas through regulations. Regulations will make clear those rural areas where restrictions will not apply. Working with the other place will also allow us to consider how other rural areas can seek exclusion from any restrictions.

Finally, I have read the *Hansard* reports of the proceedings in the other place, and on many occasions I stood at the Bar to watch them myself. I have missed proceedings in the other place, and on many occasions I have heard them say things which in future we are all going to have to address, so would it not be sensible to think about doing it now? I do understand his concerns about discouraging house building, because I know that we have to build all these houses.

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The zero-carbon homes standard is important to delivering on our climate change commitments. The cost of building to standards is reducing all the time and is now probably only about £1,500, not the £3,500 the Minister mentioned. Introducing the standard would result in homes that have lower energy bills and reduced carbon emissions. Given that Labour introduced the zero-carbon homes policy for homes built after 2016, which was disgracefully stopped by the previous Government, we will support the Lords in their amendment to bring back carbon compliance measures from 2018.

Given all the flooding we have had in this country recently, it is very strange that the Government are seeking to vote against amendment 110, which would require that 1 million new homes be built with sustainable drainage systems, helping to protect homeowners against flooding and delivering wider environmental benefits. Almost every environmental organisation and those concerned with flooding support the amendment, from the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust to Water UK, the Royal Institute of British Architects, the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management, the Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management, the Angling Trust, the Rivers Trust, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds—I could go on.

New developments will put new pressure on critical infrastructure, including drainage and flood defence. New homes continue to be built in areas of flood risk without resilience measures, such as SUDS, and many conventional drainage systems are already over capacity. In many cases, capital costs for sustainable drainage will be lower than conventional connections, as recognised in the 2010 impact assessment by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We also know that retrofitting is considerably more costly. The amendment would offer considerable protections against damage from flooding in the long term, and I do not think the Minister justified why he was voting against the amendment. I ask him to have a rethink.

We consider Lords amendment 111 to be a good one, because it seeks to limit five years the time during which the pilot to test the privatisation of the processing of planning applications can run. We appreciate that the intention is to limit the policy, but we do not agree with the policy at all, because we believe it could lead to extremely difficult conflicts of interest at the local level and would take away much needed resources from local planning departments.

Let me deal briefly with some of the Government amendments. Government amendments 98 and 99 would amend clause 129 to ensure that the Secretary of State, or the Mayor in the case of London, could prepare a local development scheme that sets out the development plan documents that the authority intends to produce and the timetable for their production for an authority that has failed to prepare one, and then direct the authority to bring the scheme forward. In effect, this means placing a requirement on authorities to have a local plan in place and it is what Labour proposed in the Lyons report, so it is good to see that the Government have taken our proposals on board.

Amendments 100 to 106 are clarifications on permission in principle, and the time limits are welcome. I must commend Baroness Andrews for all her work in the other place; it is also good that the Government accepted Lord Beecham’s amendment on developments on brownfield sites being housing-led, but we still have huge reservations as to whether this whole policy of permission in principle will bring forward more land, more quickly.

It is particularly good to see in amendments 240 to 243 that the Government have accepted what Labour argued for both in Commons Committee and in the other place—that where they consider it expedient to do so, it would be possible in principle for local planning authorities to revoke or modify permission granted by local plans or registers. We look forward to seeing the regulations that will accompany this, but we wonder why the Minister did not agree to this in Committee—still, better late than never!

Similarly, we accept amendments 124 and 127, which simplify the process for setting up new town corporations and urban development corporations. Again, this is something we argued for in Committee, and we would like to see an updated version of new towns legislation as soon as possible to deliver the garden cities and villages our country needs.

Lastly, we accept that amendments 128 to 179 clarify changes to the compulsory purchase orders process. We will monitor these in practice to see if they do enable a speeding up and a wider use of CPOs to help local authorities to deliver the additional housing that our country desperately needs.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I shall speak briefly to Lords amendments 108 on carbon compliance for new homes and Lords amendment 110 on sustainable drainage systems. Both have considerable merit, and I would be inclined to support them both if the Government were not already committed to reviews both matters. It is best to bring in such measures after full consideration of all the evidence, having weighed up and carefully assessed the pros and cons.

An understandable concern with both amendments is that they might have a disproportionate negative impact on smaller buildings. While there is a concern that a carbon compliance standard is an additional regulatory burden that could add to building costs, evidence shows that such a target incentivises innovation, leading to cost reductions and the achievement of its objective of increasing energy efficiency in new buildings.

On sustainable urban drainage systems, I have in mind my own Waveney constituency. As in many places, much new housing is proposed there in the next few years, and it saw devastating flooding of homes last year, caused partially by large new developments that did not have sustainable drainage systems.

I find it significant that Anglian Water, the statutory drainage authority for the area, is backing this amendment. It pointed to the following merits: a reduction in occurrences of surface water flooding; a reduction in the £2 billion cost of flood damage in England each year; the creation of additional drainage capacity that will help to deliver more new homes; lower bills to customers, as SUDS are cheaper than conventional drainage systems; and bringing the system in England in line with the rest of the UK.

I welcome the Government’s views of those two issues. The reviews should be wide-ranging, should be conducted in a timely fashion—both should certainly be completed by this time next year—and should be subject to full debate and scrutiny in the House and its Committees.
Mr Betts: I want to say a little about the “alternative provider” clauses and the relevant Lords amendment, which I understand that the Government will be accepting.

I continue to be concerned about what I consider to be a most peculiar form of privatisation. Normally, in cases of privatisation, the council is able to choose the companies or organisations that will provide the service and put that service out to tender. In this case—very peculiarly—the applicant will decide who will conduct the process on behalf of the council and eventually, presumably, supply information and advice to the planning committee. In other words, the council which is ultimately responsible for making the decision—and that, I think, is what the Lords amendments further clarify—will have no role in deciding which organisation will be involved in the process of working with the applicant to decide, eventually, what the recommendation on the application is to be.

There seems to be an idea that suddenly, at the end of the day, a recommendation comes out of thin air. It does not; it results from a very detailed process involving a major application, in which a planning officer and an applicant work through all the details of the scheme. The Bill, however, proposes that that should be done by an alternative provider appointed by the applicant. I think that that is a very strange process, and one that is difficult to justify.

There is also a potential conflict of interests. The alternative provider in one council who advises the planning authority about a scheme could also be a consultant operating directly on behalf of someone in another authority making a very similar application in relation to a very similar scheme, and being paid for doing so. We should be very aware of that possible conflict of interests.

The Lords amendments clearly state that the council—the planning authority—ultimately responsible for making the decision, and nothing that the alternative provider does should bind the council. I want to know whether, in the context of the pilots, the Minister intends the alternative provider to do all the work and make the recommendation to the planning committee, or whether the alternative provider will make information available to council officers who will independently make a recommendation to the planning committee. I think that that is incredibly important. Will a councillor who receives an application and a recommendation receive the recommendation from a council officer who is independent, on the basis of advice from the alternative provider, or receive it directly from the alternative provider who is appointed by the applicant? That is a fundamental point, which has not been clarified even by the Lords amendments.

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): I want to speak briefly about Lords amendment 97. The issue of planning has been at the forefront of the minds of people in my constituency. I have often said in the past that my constituents felt that planning was something that happened to them rather than something in which they could become involved. I therefore welcome the move towards neighbourhood plans.

Much of this has come about because we have had masses of development on old brownfield sites. That is, of course, a good use of such sites, but we now face the prospect of having to build 70,000 homes over the next 14 years, as that is the target that the city council has set itself. There is a great deal of concern in the constituency that we are going to have to release green-belt land to match that demand.

This has galvanised a lot of local action, and I pay tribute to those involved in the Aireborough neighbourhood development forum and in the Rawdon and Horsforth parish councils who are now working hard to develop local neighbourhood plans. However, their experience in the past has been that the city council can turn down an application on very good grounds, only for it to go to an inspector who will turn it around. Those people want to feel that they have all the necessary support and tools at their disposal to defend their neighbourhood plans. They feel that this is far too often a one-way process.

9.45 pm

I understand what the Minister has said about this, and I am grateful to him for the time he has taken to speak to me personally, as well as to other colleagues, about this. I welcome the fact that he is sympathetic to the idea that those groups should have a right to appeal, and I hope that he will work with all of us to see what can be done to give them the confidence that they want. Those parish councillors should be allowed to defend the neighbourhood plans that they have drawn up. Many of them are volunteers, and they have spent a considerable amount of time developing first-rate plans. They want to have confidence that the system will support what they have drawn up rather than working against them. I hope that the Minister will look into that. I hope that he will also ensure that emerging neighbourhood plans will have equal weight with those that have already been adopted.

Helen Hayes: I welcome the Lords amendments that introduce exemptions from permission in principle and clarify the qualifying documents under which permission in principle can be granted. I also welcome the amendments that will allow permission in principle to be overturned on the basis of new information, such as archaeological remains being discovered on a site. I argued for this in the Public Bill Committee.

I am concerned, however, that too many aspects of technical details consent are being left to be set out in regulations. Technical details could include the height or density of a development, open space provisions, design, layout and many other considerations. I maintain, as I did in Committee, that while those details can be informed by technical studies, their substance can often make a fundamental difference to how communities feel about a planning proposal. They are therefore often far closer to matters of principle than the description “technical details” implies. I had hoped that, by this stage, we might have seen some of that detail being set out in the Bill.

I am also concerned by the ability that will be introduced in this legislation to appoint third parties to assess planning applications. This will remove democratic accountability from the assessment of the applications. I welcome the fact that the Government have clarified that councils will be the final decision makers, but important judgments are made during the assessment process, which involves a substantial amount of work. Councils would effectively have to repeat that process to
enable proper scrutiny or to unravel that work. A far better solution would be to allow councils to recover the full cost of the development management process from planning application fees, so that they could be properly resourced to carry out this democratic role with full democratic scrutiny and accountability.

Fundamentally, the planning aspects of the Housing and Planning Bill miss the opportunity to set out a positive vision for planning, to engage and involve communities in solving the housing crisis, to strengthen our plan-led system, which is highly valued and highly regarded across the world, and to give communities and homebuilders the certainty they need as we face an unprecedented need to build new homes in this country.

Antoinette Sandbach: I know that the Minister is aware of my constituents’ feelings in the light of an avalanche of applications by developers against adopted neighbourhood plans and an avalanche of objections by developers to emerging neighbourhood plans. I have seen this in Tarporley, in Moulton and in Davenham. My constituents describe themselves as being under siege. In the light of the debate that we have had today, particularly on clause 97, I urge the Minister to take this opportunity to review the planning legislation so that we can have some certainty about the interplay between neighbourhood plans and local plans and provide stronger protections for residents such as mine in Edisbury. My constituents have put time and effort into creating robust neighbourhood plans that have been passed by inspectors, but they now feel as though they are under siege. We need a full review of the planning process if we are to strengthen local democracy and achieve the localism that everyone in Edisbury so desperately wants.

Tom Brake: I want to spend a couple of minutes on two amendments. I am disappointed by what the Minister had to say about amendment 108, which he said would cost homebuilders some £3,000. We heard from the Labour Front-Bench team that it might be as little as £1,500, and as builders get used to building homes to high emissions standards, I suspect that the cost will fall further in years to come. Over the lifetime of a property, the savings to its owners will be significant and much greater than £3,000—if that even is the figure. I am therefore disappointed that the Minister is not willing to support amendment 108.

The Minister said that amendment 110, which I will be pressing to a vote, was faulty, but it was not clear whether he was saying that it was defective. If that is the case, the Minister could have amended it in a way that he was saying that it was defective. If that is the case, the Minister could have amended it in a way that was acceptable to him to ensure that it was not faulty. He has heard the long list of organisations, including the water industry, community groups, and a range of water management experts, that feel that the current arrangements for sustainable drainage systems are inadequate and unsatisfactory. Amendment 110 would ensure that developers provided SUDS to reduce the pressure on existing systems, which we know from the flooding up and down the country cannot cope with current levels of water.

If there is a vote on amendment 108 this evening, I will certainly support it. I will also press amendment 110 to a vote.

Rebecca Pow: I know that we are tight for time. I listened with much interest to what the Minister said about sustainable drainage systems, and I urge him to ensure that the best possible use is made of devices to protect people’s land and to manage surface water, regardless of the size of the development. Having witnessed the consequences of the terrible flooding in Taunton Deane in 2013-14, I am conscious that we must harness every tool in the box to deal with flooding. According to the Met Office, an awful lot more water is coming our way, so we have to be ready.

I am also conscious that Taunton Deane, much like other parts of the country, has seen a massive, rapid increase in house building, which I applaud, because we do need it. I fully support the Government’s proactive house building plan, but I call on the Minister to give due consideration to the water run-off from new houses so that that does not add to the flooding risk. Developers are currently encouraged to install SUDS, but they retain the legal right just to connect new properties directly to the sewerage system, which probably makes more economic sense in many cases. Lords amendment 110 has much support, including from water companies, the Institution of Civil Engineers, the Council for the Protection of Rural England, the Royal Institute of Environmental Sciences, the Water Industry, and the Adaptation Sub-Committee of the Committee on Climate Change.

In Somerset and elsewhere, we are required to consider a wider catchment approach to how we address water management and flood prevention. The use of the SUDS will inevitably play its part as time goes on. Both the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and the Environmental Audit Committee are conducting inquiries into flooding and water management. We await their conclusions with interest, and they will no doubt have many useful things to say. We, as a population, will have to look seriously at holding more water on our land to control the rate at which it rushes into rivers and the rest of the water system.

The Minister has spent a lot of time on this important issue and has considered Lords amendment 110 in detail. I listened to his reasons for not including it in the Bill right now, but I would welcome any future deliberations and review. I would be most willing to work with him on the matter to bring forward the best possible outcomes and to ensure that we encourage our house building programme without exacerbating the risk of flooding or causing unnecessary environmental degradation.

Anne Marie Morris rose—

Mr Speaker: If Anne Marie Morris orates briefly, she might almost allow the Minister, with leave of the House, a couple of minutes to reply, although she is not obliged to do so. In this case she has some power over the Minister, but she may only have it once.

Anne Marie Morris: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will keep my comments brief.

As the Minister knows, I have campaigned for a community right of appeal for many years, and it is now time to consider that issue seriously as there is more and more support for it across the House. The Minister said that the original right of appeal was introduced to redress the balance in favour of the landowner, who was effectively having his freedom taken away. I suggest that the time has come to redress the balance in favour of
We are seeing that engagement with the planning system leads to undeniably positive results, which is why I am so passionate about getting right our reforms and our delivery of neighbourhood planning. It is reassuring to hear so many colleagues making their case so passionately to ensure that the voice of their local community is heard and properly represented in the planning system, as that is exactly what neighbourhood planning is about. There is no point in building expectation into the planning system if we then slow it down with red tape and extra bureaucracy. There is no point in getting local authorities to engage properly with local communities if we then prevent building with other red tape and regulations. That is why we have made our points in the debate about drainage and energy-efficiency. It is important that we get this right, that we do the work to get this right, and that we listen to what colleagues have said to make sure that we do just that in the period ahead. We are here to deliver the housing that our country needs.

Brandon Lewis: The debate has summed up just how important the planning system is to many of those who write to us, or who come to see us in our surgeries every week. My hon. Friends have spoken passionately and clearly about the importance of empowering local communities, and all those in my Department who have responsibility for planning understand how deeply a decision about where a new development should go affects those who live or work nearby.

Good planning is about more than just buildings. It is about proper funding as well as planning, and about ensuring that those who make infrastructure decisions understand the issues and are held to account. I cannot think of anybody better to do that than the community.

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Good planning is about more than just buildings. It is about proper funding as well as planning, and about ensuring that those who make infrastructure decisions understand the issues and are held to account. I cannot think of anybody better to do that than the community.

Good planning is about people, and we have heard good things said by good people this evening. Good planning is about seeing past documents and planning applications, and being able to judge the impact of the changing nature of our places on the families and communities that grow up there.

That is why, as my hon. Friends have rightly outlined, neighbourhood planning is so important. It is the future of a community being agreed and designed by that community, and such work must be respected. It is about local people deciding where their children will live when they grow up and leave home. It is about local decisions that affect the future of our schools and our shops. That is why it is so effective and empowering—the ultimate localism. Local support for house building has doubled in the past four years, while opposition to local house building has more than halved. We have empowered more than 1,800 communities to start the process of neighbourhood planning, which we introduced in 2012, and nearly 10 million people in 72% of local authorities are now represented. On average, 89% of people voted yes in their neighbourhood plan referendum.

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Housing and Planning Bill 3 MAY 2016

Tellers for the Ayes: George Hollingbery and Sarah Newton

Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tohur, Kelly
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

NOES

Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 108 disagreed to.

Lords amendment 109 disagreed to.

Motion made, and Question put. That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 110.—(Brandon Lewis.)

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr Speaker: I must remind the House that the motion relates exclusively to England and Wales. A double majority is therefore required.

The House having divided: Ayes 285, Noes 164.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England and Wales: Ayes 285, Noes 161.

Division No. 262

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afryje, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Arger, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brooksnorke, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Carmichael, Neil
Cartridge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chihi, Reham
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James

Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Caroline
Donajong, Mr Jonathan
Donelain, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyly-Price, Jackie
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen

Tellers for the Noes: Holly Lynch and Jeff Smith

Brandon Lewis.
Graying, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Guummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hallon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hinds, Damian
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawarna, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrew
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McParland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Millling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neil, Robert
Nokes, Caroline
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Pattel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, rh Mike
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Roberts, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Rhys
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Steward, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Stunt, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Anderson, Mr David
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Bette, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Mr Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Campbell,Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carron, Mr Alastair
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffee, Ann
Cooper, rh Yvette
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Dowd, Jim
Dromey, Jack
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Elford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elliott, rh Mrs Louise
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Warman, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Wittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggins, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim
Tellers for the Ayes:
George Hollingbery and
Sarah Newton
NOES
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Gapes, Mike
Glass, Pat
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Gwynne, Andrew
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Heron, Lady
Hiller, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Kinnock, Stephen
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mr Speaker: I must now put the Questions necessary to dispose of the remaining Lords amendments. First, under the Standing Order, I must put the Question on the remaining Lords amendments that relate exclusively to England.

Lords amendments 100, 98, 99, 101 to 107, 112 to 127 and 240 to 243 agreed to.

Mr Speaker: I must now put the Question on the remaining Lords amendments that relate exclusively to England and Wales.

Lords amendments 128 to 179 and 244 to 282 agreed to.

Mr Speaker: I must now put the Question on the remaining Lords amendments that have not been certified.

Lords amendments 180, 181, 189 and 192 to 194 agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H). That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendments 37, 47, 54, 55, 57, 58 and 108 to 110;

That Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods, Andrew Griffiths, Brandon Lewis, Seema Kennedy, Grahame M. Morris and Julian Smith be members of the Committee;

That Brandon Lewis be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(Julian Smith.)

Question agreed to.

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

SENIOR COURTS OF ENGLAND AND WALES

That the draft Crown Court (Recording) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 21 March, be approved.—(Kris Hopkins.)

Question agreed to.

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

LICENCES AND LICENSING

That the draft Licensing Act 2003 (Her Majesty The Queen's Birthday Licensing Hours) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 12 April, be approved.—(Kris Hopkins.)

Question agreed to.

Mr Speaker: We come now to the petition—

The Vice-Chamberlain of Her Majesty’s Household (Kris Hopkins) rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is ahead of himself. What a fast-thinking denizen of the House the Comptroller of Her Majesty’s Household, the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell), is. Why should I expect otherwise from a cerebral Whip?

PETITION

Closure of Garforth Clinic

10.31 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I rise to present a petition relating to the closure of Garforth clinic. I have more than 1,000 signatures from my local community, who believe that the Leeds Community Healthcare NHS Trust decision to close the clinic has not been properly thought through.

The petition states: The petition of residents of Elmet and Rothwell, declares that the decision of the Leeds Community Healthcare NHS Trust to close Garforth Clinic removes ease of access to local health services for elderly and disabled patients; further that it removes podiatry, adult dietetics, children's speech and language therapy, psychological therapies, musculo-skeletal, cardiac and weight management services from Garforth; further that it removes access to a local warfarin clinic for those without personal transportation; further that it highlights a failure to comply with statutory functions of an NHS Trust; further that the Leeds Community Healthcare NHS Trust has failed to identify a sustainable alternative or detail how neighbouring health centres will cope with increased demand; further that the Trust has failed to reference pressure from Leeds City Council’s Core Strategy, which plans to build thousands of additional dwellings around the
town; and further that the Trust withdrew from a pre-arranged public meeting with our Member of Parliament and City Councillors at which residents were hoping to explain their personal concerns over the removal of local health services.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department of Health to encourage the independent Leeds Community Healthcare NHS Trust to review its decision to close Garforth Clinic; arrange a meeting with residents to answer concerns; and re-consult with patients on the impact that such a closure will have.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Letting Agent Fees and Deposits: Private Rented Sector

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

10.33 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to secure this debate. Tonight, I want to highlight the emerging scandal of letting agent fees. Those are fees charged by letting agents when a tenant takes on a new tenancy, on top of any deposit that needs to be paid to secure a property and in addition to the monthly rent that needs to be paid in advance. In London and the south-east, letting agent fees have rocketed over the last two years as competition for rental properties has grown. Not only has the amount charged by letting agents increased, but there has been an increase in the types of fees charged.

There seems to be a particular problem in London, where competition in the private rented sector is fiercest, but the problem is also now affecting many parts of the south-east, including my own constituency of Lewes. My constituency is only 58.2 miles from London and, despite the poor rail service, which has been the subject of previous Adjournment debates, is still very commutable. After being priced out of the London housing market, many people move to the south coast, so competition for rental properties has soared in my constituency during the past 18 months, and letting agents have put up their fees accordingly.

At this point, I should declare that I am a patron of a local housing charity, Homelink, in Lewes. It provides financial assistance to people struggling to secure a deposit for a home to rent. Homelink has seen a significant increase in local letting agent fees during the past 18 months. As a result, it is having to provide local families with financial support for the fees, as well as help for the deposit. In 2015, Homelink provided over £101,000 in financial assistance to local people to help them to secure a home. Despite that, Homelink has seen key workers, those on a low income and young people priced out of the local property market not because they could not afford the rent, but because they could not afford the fees and the deposit required up front.

To investigate the extent of the problem of lettings agent fees, my local citizens advice bureaux in Seaford and Lewes researched those fees across the constituency. They found that the fees can range from £175 to £922. Such fees are in addition to the average six-week rent deposit required—it is rapidly becoming an eight-week rent deposit—and the month’s rent needed in advance. Using the rent calculator provided by the charity Shelter, which is available on its website, a new tenant wanting to rent a two-bedroom property in Lewes, where the average rent is £1,200 a month, would need to stump up in advance anything from £3,032 to £3,779, depending on the lettings fees charged. Realistically, how many of us could afford that?

The research from the citizens advice bureaux goes further, and makes fascinating reading. They have found that not only do fees vary from £175 to just under £1,000, but that such variations can be found by letting agents on the same high street, with the big national letting agents tending to charge the most, while the small independent agents charge the least. Moreover,
the type of fees that a letting agent charges varies greatly. Letting agents often charge a holding fee of about £200 to secure a property.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the problem is not just the size of the charges, which can be great, but the lack of transparency? They are often levied on the basis of a pretext that is completely unclear and completely unjustified.

Maria Caulfield: I completely agree. I will come on to that specific point in a moment.

The holding fee of about £200 does not always secure a property and is not always refundable. A credit check can amount to about £100. All letting agents charge for drawing up a tenancy agreement, but some charge more for other tenants on the agreement. One tenant who takes out a tenancy agreement may be charged up to £350, but a second tenant may be charged up to £450. Reference checks cost roughly £100, and admin costs usually amount to another £100 to cover phone calls and postage. Some letting agents are making a new charge for an express move. Someone wanting to move into a property within three days will have to pay an extra £100, while to do so within five days costs £50. Letting agents even charge people if they have a pet—this is separate from what the landlord requires—and often charge them £200 to bring a pet with them. If one of the young people in a group who are sharing a property moves out, the person who takes over the sharing arrangement can be charged £300 just to change the name of the sharer in the agreement.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. My hon. Friend is quite right to raise this subject. There is clearly not a free market for tenants, who follow property rather than choose between letting agents because of fees, so it is an issue that we need to address. However, letting agents rely on these fees for income, and so that income would have to come from somewhere else; it could be added to rent or come from higher fees for landlords. Agents may also choose to take the most secure tenants and prefer those with good credit histories, rather than take a risk on a tenant with an inferior credit history, because of the risk of having to do the work twice, which would add to their costs. There is a potential issue there, so should we consider a cap rather than abolition?

Maria Caulfield: I completely agree. That will be one of the recommendations I make to the Minister.

Research by the National Union of Students mirrored that undertaken by my local citizens advice bureaux. The NUS surveyed 3,000 students and found that, on average, students pay £887 in fees, going up to more than £1,000 if they rent from an agent online. That shows that the situation in my constituency is being replicated across the country.

There is still one more injustice that tenants have to endure on top—the six-month tenancy regime. Very often, tenants want a longer lease and landlords are happy to renew for a longer time. But it is in the letting agent’s interests to keep tenants on a rotating six-month tenancy, because every time that tenancy is renewed the agent charges another £150 to £350. It is a classic opportunity to fleece tenants once again. The renewal of the same lease for the same tenants for the same property just costs the tenants more money. In law, a tenant should be able to ask for a longer lease from their landlord, but letting agents often ensure that that message is not passed on, and so every six months tenants have to pay fees to agents for little more than a new piece of paper.

To go back to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), landlords are often none the wiser about the charges that their tenants face. In fact, landlords often pay no fees at all, because they benefit from letting agents who are keen to encourage them to put their properties on their books rather than those of another letting agent. The charges are therefore passed on to the tenant.

What do letting agents actually do to justify their fees? They do a great deal of work. A let-only deal will involve the letting agent assessing a property for rent, submitting the advert, carrying out viewings, doing tenant reference and credit checks, ensuring that tenants have contents insurance, providing tenancy agreements, setting up payments and informing utility companies of any changes. However, does that work really justify charging tenants just under £1,000?

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some very important points. Does she appreciate, however, that estate agents are making around 40% of their income from lettings fees, so if we abolish or cap them, those costs will only be passed on to the tenant in a different way, principally through higher rents from the landlord? There are perhaps two answers. She has already alluded on one, which is to try to encourage—not mandate, but encourage—longer tenancies. Secondly, this House should be much more cautious in future about increasing the regulatory burden on landlords, so that letting agents do not have so many items to check off before they can get tenants into properties; I am thinking, for example, of the right to rent changes brought in recently, which put extra costs and burdens on landlords and letting agents.

Maria Caulfield: I thank my hon. Friend for his points. I am sure he will hear some of those suggestions in my recommendations.

The Government have done a tremendous amount to protect tenants and restrict over-exuberant letting agents. Last year, they made it illegal for agents to charge potential tenants to register with them or to charge for providing lists of properties. The Government also changed the law so that agents have to advertise their fees publicly in advance, both online and in their offices; non-compliance is enforceable by local trading standards officers, with a maximum fine of £5,000.

That change is very welcome, but in reality the law is not being followed. Again, my enthusiastic bunch of volunteers at the citizens advice bureaux did a form of mystery shopping locally. They visited 10 letting agents in Lewes and 15 in the town of Seaford. Of those 25, only one had its fees easily and publicly displayed. In practice, then, tenants are none the wiser that there is such a difference in fees between letting agents in the same town.

I therefore have five asks of the Government to ensure further protection for those who find themselves part of generation rent—very often those who cannot
afford to buy a property or get a mortgage. First, we should indeed cap letting agent fees, because there can be no justification for the difference in the fees currently charged. Secondly, we should set standards for what can and cannot be charged for. For example, is it right that tenants are charged a holding fee that does not actually hold the property they want and that is not refundable? Thirdly, we should end the practice of charging for tenancy renewal, or at least give greater protection to tenants on short-term lets.

**Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that short-term lets of six months are not only hugely costly to tenants in what should be a straightforward renewal—there should also be much more openness about the possibility of having a longer tenancy agreement—but undermine people’s sense of security and their connection to their community?

**Maria Caulfield**: I agree with my hon. Friend, because tenants have a legal right to ask for longer tenancy agreements, but often that request is not passed on to their landlords.

Fourthly, there should be tougher penalties for not displaying fees, because that is clearly being flouted. I urge that councils should be allowed to keep the money from any fines to encourage them to enforce the law that already exists. Fifthly, we should promote this issue so that tenants are aware that there is a difference between the fees that are charged, often on the same high street for the same properties. I have written about that in my monthly column in the *Sussex Express* in order to highlight the issue so that tenants are aware and can then make choices for themselves.

In conclusion, letting agent fees have the greatest impact on the young, the poor and those excluded from the housing market. Many letting agents know that these people are desperate to secure somewhere to live and take full advantage by charging exorbitant fees. There is huge competition for housing, particularly in London and the south-east, and if someone refuses to pay these fees there are three or four people behind them in the queue who will. I urge the Government to step in and protect tenants from the scourgé of letting agent fees.

10.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) for securing this debate and giving the House an opportunity to discuss letting agent fees and tenants’ deposits in the private rented sector. The Government are committed to promoting a strong and thriving professional rented sector where good landlords can prosper and hard-working tenants can enjoy decent standards and receive a service that represents value for money for their rent. The vast majority of landlords provide a good service and rent out good-quality, well-managed properties. We know from the English housing survey that 84% of tenants are satisfied with their accommodation and that, on average, tenants stay in a property for four years.

The private rented sector is expanding and is now a major part of the country’s housing stock, providing homes for over 4 million households. We want to see professional buy-to-let and institutional landlords and high-quality and professional letting agents who provide value for money for tenants. We have therefore introduced a range of measures to help drive up standards and improve the quality and management of privately rented housing.

Since 2014, all letting agents and property managers have been required to belong to one of three Government-approved redress schemes, with a penalty of up to £5,000 for those who fail to comply. Where standards do not meet expectations, both landlords and landlords now have an effective and transparent means of raising their concerns. This offers a clear route for both landlords and tenants to pursue complaints by weeding out the cowboys who give agents a bad name, and at the same time we hope to drive up standards for tenants.

Since 2015, letting agents and property managers have also been required to display a full tariff of their fees prominently in their offices and on their websites, and to make clear whether or not they belong to a client money protection scheme, with a fine of up to £5,000 if they fail to comply.

We have introduced legislation, through the Deregulation Act 2015, that prevents landlords and letting agents from evicting a tenant simply for making a legitimate complaint about the condition of the property. They have also been prevented from serving open-ended eviction notices at the start of a tenancy, helping to improve tenant security, which I hope my hon. Friend will agree is an extremely important move. We have also made £12 million available to a number of local authorities to help them crack down on rogue landlords and drive them out of the sector. Results have been impressive, with over 40,000 properties inspected and legal action taken against more than 3,000 landlords to date.

And we are going further. Through the Housing and Planning Bill, we are introducing a package of measures that will enable local authorities to do more to improve standards in the sector and ensure that rogue landlords either are forced to improve or leave the sector. Civil penalties of up to £30,000, which the local authority can retain and use for housing and enforcement purposes, will be levied in the most difficult cases, while a database of rogue landlords and letting agents will allow councils across the country to keep landlords and letting agents convicted of criminal offences firmly on their radar and a target for enforcement action.

My hon. Friend will know that the Government, through the Bill, are introducing banning orders for the most serious and prolific offenders. The measures will also require the repayment of rent where a landlord has illegally evicted a tenant, failed to rectify a potentially serious health or safety hazard or breached a banning order. There will also be a tougher “fit and proper person” test to help ensure that rogue landlords and letting agents are properly vetted before they can manage licensed properties.

The Government are committed to ensuring that where a tenant pays a deposit to their landlord, it will be returned at the end of the tenancy, provided the tenant has complied with the terms of the tenancy agreement. Where a deposit is paid in conjunction with an assured shorthold tenancy, it must be protected by the landlord
or agent in one of the Government-approved schemes, and certain information must be sent to the tenant within 30 days of the deposit being received. If a landlord fails to do so, the tenant can initiate legal action and the landlord may have to pay the tenant up to three times the amount of the deposit paid. Tenancy deposit schemes in England have protected over 11.5 million deposits since their launch in 2007 and helped to raise standards in the private rented sector and ensure that tenants are treated fairly at the end of a tenancy.

I am clear that the vast majority of letting agents provide a good service to tenants and landlords and that most fees charged reflect genuine business costs. I do not believe, therefore, that a blanket ban or cap on letting agent fees is the answer to tackling the small minority of rogue letting agents who exploit their customers by imposing inflated fees for their services. Banning or capping letting agent fees would not make renting any cheaper for tenants—tenants would still end up paying but through higher rents—which is why the Government believe that ensuring full transparency is the best approach. This can be done by requiring letting agents to publicise a full tariff of their fees, giving consumers the information they want and supporting the majority of reputable letting agents. Such transparency will help to deter double charging by letting agents and enable both tenants and landlords to shop around, encouraging agents to offer competitive fees.

The evidence from Scotland, where letting agent fees have been banned, strongly suggests a direct relationship between a ban and higher rents. The Association of Residential Letting Agents commented that “there was strong evidence of a negative fallout in Scotland…agents have gone out of business, some have raised landlords’ fees, some have put up rents”.

In the first quarter after the introduction of the ban, rents in Edinburgh increased by more than 5% and in Aberdeen by over 6%. While a direct link between the abolition of fees and higher rents cannot be proved, these rises are significantly higher than inflation. By comparison, over the same period, the average rent increase across England was just 1%.

Moving on to deal with my hon. Friend’s specific questions, I have probably covered those she asked about the cap. Although we do not believe that a cap on letting agent fees is the right answer, when the requirement on letting agents to publicise their fees was introduced in October 2015, we said that we would review how well the scheme was working after 12 months. I think that is a sensible approach, allowing the new system time to bed in and to demonstrate that it is delivering the expected benefits.

I cannot pre-judge the review or its recommendations, but I am clear that we are not ruling anything out. If we find that the approach is not, in fact, working well, we will consider whether more needs to be done, including looking at the case for taking action on fees. The review will be carried out later this year. In the meantime, the Government’s position is that a ban or cap on letting agent fees would be disproportionate, probably pushing up rents without benefiting either landlords or tenants.

My hon. Friend made a request about having statutory tenancies longer than the usual six or 12-month ones. As I said at the outset, the average tenancy is sustained for a period of four years, and the Government are not currently looking to change that. My hon. Friend will know, I am sure, that the model tenancies brought forward by the Government over the past few years have been extremely successful and have been adopted by many letting agents.

My hon. Friend mentioned tougher penalties. When we look at the review, I am sure that that issue will be considered, too. My hon. Friend knows—she served on the Housing and Planning Bill Committee—that there are significant penalties for rogue landlords and rogue letting agents. Civil penalties of up to £30,000 exist as a deterrent to them, and as my hon. Friend mentioned, that sum can be kept by local authorities to assist them with further enforcement.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important issue, and I hope that my response this evening has reassured her that the Government take extremely seriously the issues she has set out for us. Following a review later this year, we will consider whether more needs to be done.

Question put and agreed to.

10.58 pm

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

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Cotonou Agreement

1. Mr Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (UKIP): How many countries have had aid suspended for corruption or failure to implement good governance under the terms of the Cotonou agreement in the last five years. [904848]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Justine Greening): Six countries have faced action: Guinea-Bissau, Zimbabwe, Fiji, Madagascar, Guinea and Burundi.

Mr Carswell: Does UK overseas aid still include revenue support, and does the Secretary of State not agree that such direct Government-to-Government aid often inhibits good governance? Far from encouraging democracy, it actually encourages kleptocracy.

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that we have curbed general budget support, which has been reduced by nearly 90% since 2010. There is now one remaining programme of general budget support, which will finish shortly.

I disagree that it is wrong to work with Governments. In the end, one way in which we can tackle corruption is by strengthening public finance management and tax revenue authorities. We need to find a balance and provide earmarked support that actually achieves an impact.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Every year, the Palestinian Authority gives £84 million to convicted terrorists serving time in Israeli jails, out of a general fund to which this country contributes part of its £72 million a year in aid to the Palestinians. Is that not corrupt practice? How is it an example of good governance? I disagree that it is wrong to work with Governments. In the end, one way in which we can tackle corruption is by strengthening public finance management and tax revenue authorities. We need to find a balance and provide earmarked support that actually achieves an impact.

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Justine Greening: My hon. Friend raises a pertinent question. If the refugee camps that we support in countries around Syria were not funded and were closed, do we think the people there would stay in Syria? They would not; they would almost certainly look to come to Europe. The irony is that parties such as the UK Independence party that want to cut back on aid have, in effect, a pro-migration policy.

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Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): Today the Select Committee on International Development publishes its report on the crisis in Yemen, and one issue that we highlight is the impact on children and young people, including the fact that 47% of school-age children are not at school. Will the Secretary of State inform the House of what plans the Government have to use the forthcoming world humanitarian summit in Istanbul to focus on education in emergencies such as the situation in Yemen?

Justine Greening: The crises in Syria and Yemen shine a spotlight on an issue that I feel has been missed out of humanitarian responses for too long—the fact that 37 million children around the world are out of school purely because they are in areas affected by either emergencies or conflict. The UK has led the way, with the “No Lost Generation” initiative, in working with countries to get children back into school. We would like to do the same in Yemen, but as the hon. Gentleman
Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): DFID funds the International Citizen Service, which helps young people from Britain to help their counterparts in developing countries. Will the Secretary of State join me in encouraging more young people from Havant and across Britain to get involved?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend has asked a really sensible question. More than 20,000 young people have now benefited from the International Citizen Service. It gives them a fantastic experience at a really important stage in their lives. In our manifesto we committed to tripling the numbers of young people able to benefit from it.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheik (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Do the Government recognise the important role that young people play in combating global poverty? Will the Secretary of State welcome the commitment in the Scottish National party manifesto to continue funding Scotland’s development education centres, and will she set out the steps that the UK Government are taking to promote global citizenship across the country?

Justine Greening: We recognise the Scottish Government’s work in Malawi, which is also very much the focus of UK work. On young people’s role, from my perspective, it is not simply that young people can be, and are, advocates for development but that they are many of the people on the ground delivering. If we look at the response to Ebola in Sierra Leone, young people in communities did the work to help those communities understand how to stay safe.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): For young people in countries most affected by the trauma of war and displacement there can be as few as one psychiatrist or mental health worker per 2 million people. How will the Secretary of State ensure that the Department has adequate resources to fulfil its commitment to young people’s mental health, as set out in the disability framework?

Justine Greening: We have brought in the disability framework over the past couple of years because we felt that we had not focused on that area in development in the way that we should have. Children’s mental health is incredibly important. We have put in more money through great agencies such as UNICEF to fund psychosocial support. One of the biggest problems we face is making sure that we have Arabic speakers with the right kinds of skills in the right quantity to deal with the scale of the challenge.

Tax Avoidance and Financial Transparency

3. Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the effect of tax avoidance in developing countries involving institutions based in the Crown dependencies and British overseas territories on the economies of those developing countries.

5. Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the effect of low levels of financial transparency in the Crown dependencies and British overseas territories on the economies of developing countries.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Mr Desmond Swayne): Through our presidency of the G8 in 2013 and through the G20 we have led on assisting developing countries in strengthening their tax regimes, and tackling avoidance and evasion. UK overseas territories have agreed to furnish our tax and law enforcement agencies with company beneficial ownership information.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the Minister for that answer, but the world’s poorest countries are deprived of some $1 trillion every year because of money laundering and tax avoidance. Will he call on the British overseas territories to establish a public register of beneficial ownership ahead of next week’s anti-corruption summit in London?

Mr Swayne: We are light years ahead of where we were, and indeed of any ambition expressed by previous Administrations. Full automatic exchange of taxpayer account information will be available from September this year, and company beneficial ownership information will be available to our tax authorities by June next year.

Jo Cox: I acknowledge the progress made by previous Governments and this one on this issue, but is it not time, in advance of the anti-corruption summit, to require overseas territories and Crown dependencies to provide public registers of beneficial ownership?

Mr Swayne: We have advanced a huge amount by agreement and leadership, not by having recourse to compulsion. The overseas territories are now well in advance of many of our major trading partners. It is better to proceed by agreement. Much of the information will be available through the initiative for automatic exchange of beneficial ownership registers, to which 33 countries have now signed up.

Sir Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to look very carefully at the purpose of this? Its purpose is not simply to deal with excessive avoidance and evasion schemes—they often mask deeply corrupt and criminal activities. What has been achieved is the ability for our law enforcement agencies to get in there and get that information, without tipping off the criminals we are seeking.

Mr Swayne: I pay tribute to the National Crime Agency, and the unit within it paid for by DFID, for tracing that international corruption. My right hon. Friend is right. Huge amounts of revenue are being denied to the poorest countries in the world, and we have to do something about that.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): The questions asked by the hon. Ladies are entirely legitimate, and the Minister has replied well. The added liquidity that comes as a result of moneys coming in—often from parts of the developing world—to places
such as the overseas territories and the Crown dependencies can lead to a range of project finance initiatives that benefit many people in the developing world. It is not as straightforward as suggesting that moneys in tax havens do not have a longer-term benefit, particularly in those parts of the world that the Department holds close to its heart.

Mr Swayne: My right hon. Friend is right. The common reporting standard is vital, together with the automatic exchange of taxpayer account information. Precisely because of that, we have a pilot running in Ghana to draw developing countries into that arrangement.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that tax avoidance in developing countries costs them three times what they get in aid. Why will the Department not put pressure on Government colleagues to insist that offshore centres such as the British Virgin Islands and the Cayman Islands set up registers of beneficial ownership that are open to the public?

Mr Swayne: We are vastly in advance of the situation left by previous Administrations, and we are advancing by agreement. That information will be available if countries sign up to the initiative for the automatic exchange of beneficial ownership registers, and next month the United Kingdom will be the first country to publish that information.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): Another way that the UK can increase transparency and help to lead the world towards more open communication and higher revenues for developing countries is to support strongly the extractive industries transparency initiative. The previous Government signed us up to that, after too many years in which we had stood aside from it. Will the Minister confirm that we will be leading other parts of the British overseas territories, and signing up to the EITI?

Mr Swayne: Those territories certainly have extractives, and we are pushing that agenda. I regularly meet representatives of the extractives industry to drive forward this initiative.

Access to Energy: Africa

4. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve access to energy for the poorest people in Africa.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr Nick Hurd): Some 600 million people in sub-Saharan Africa still do not have access to the electricity that we all take for granted, and progress towards the global goal of universal access by 2030 is too slow. We launched the Energy Africa campaign to accelerate the expansion of the household solar market and make it work for the poorest people in the world.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Does the Minister agree that solar power can make a real difference to economic development in places such as the Sahel? What is DFID doing to assist the roll-out of off-grid solar power for countries coming out of conflict, such as South Sudan and Somalia?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend has a profound understanding of the region, and I assure him that Somalia is one of the first countries to have signed an agreement with us on the Energy Africa campaign. I hope that many others will follow.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): In many African countries oil is still king, and with that comes a lot of corruption that prevents benefits from going to the poorest people in those countries. What is DFID doing to eliminate corruption, which undermines the projects, such as Energy Africa, that the Minister is talking about?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point. DFID has an extensive range of programmes to combat the culture of corruption, particularly in oil-producing states such as Nigeria, and an anti-corruption summit will soon be convened in London to address those specific issues.

13. [904860] Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Will the Minister update the House on what role Britain can play in encouraging the private sector to invest in energy infrastructure in Africa?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and the whole thrust of the Energy Africa campaign is about accelerating a market. It is not about dumping a huge amount of public money on the table or a traditional aid programme; it is about accelerating a market in which we fully expect British entrepreneurs and investors to play a leading role.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): A fundamental prerequisite to accessing energy in the poorest nations in Africa is access to clean water. What assistance do the Government give to the many charitable institutions that have proven that clean water can be delivered to millions of people in a cost-effective way?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the need to retain ambition in making it easier to access water, and I am delighted that the UK continues to play a leading role in fulfilling our manifesto commitment of connecting another 60 million people to water during this Parliament. As he rightly points out, non-governmental organisations are an important part of delivering on that commitment.

Fraud and Corruption

6. Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to tackle fraud and corruption in developing countries.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Justine Greening): Corruption is bad for development, it is bad for poor people and it is bad for business. All our country programmes have anti-corruption strategies. DFID funds units in the National Crime Agency that are dedicated to investigating the money laundering and bribery that affects developing countries.
Mr Burrowes: Corruption is also bad for taxpayers who have a natural concern if they see too much of their money going into the hands of corrupt Governments and other organisations, particularly in Africa. What are peer-to-peer lending and giving doing to tackle this issue?

Justine Greening: As my hon. Friend says, platforms are now emerging that allow charitable donations to be sent directly from an individual in the UK to, for example, a remote village in Uganda or an entrepreneur in Kenya seeking to raise money from the UK public directly. Strong regulation is key. DFID is now actively working with the industry to see how this approach can be made better.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the best ways we can help developing countries to tackle fraud is to make sure there is no fraud and corruption in the UK? Will she look at whether the murderers of Mr Magnitsky have hidden away something like $20 million or $30 million in the UK? Is that something she would like to investigate?

Justine Greening: I am sure I will look further at the case the right hon. Gentleman mentions, but DFID funds and helped to establish the international corruption unit that is now part of the National Crime Agency. It is there specifically to ensure we are able to investigate cases of corruption and fraud that affect the UK system, as well as developing countries.

Mr Speaker: That was very, very dedicated of the Secretary of State. It was, if I may say so, an elastic—one might almost say a liberal and possibly a democratic—interpretation of the question on the Order Paper.

Justine Greening: I assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to be a leader in global aid transparency. Taxpayers can already see on the web the Department’s projects in every country. Indeed, last month the Department was again rated as “very good” in Publish What You Fund’s aid transparency index.

Tom Brake: Corruption is also bad for taxpayers. The Secretary of State has made of the effectiveness of her Department’s spending in the Palestinian territories in achieving its aims.

Justine Greening: I do. In fact, DFID has a series of controls to manage the inherent risks not just in Somalia but in many of the other countries where we work. We make extensive use of third-party monitoring so we can verify independently that every pound is spent effectively.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Justine Greening): Three weeks ago at the World Bank spring meetings in Washington, we discussed the central role that development plays in tackling the root causes of migration, terrorism and conflict. I should inform the House that no representative I met thought it would be a good idea for the UK to leave Europe. Last week in Kenya, I saw at first hand how our support for refugees and for creating livelihoods for young people is not only the right thing to do for them, but firmly in our national interest, allowing people to stay in their home region.

Andrea Jenkyns: On my recent visit to India, I saw the fantastic work being done by the World Health Organisation, UNICEF and others to vaccinate children.
against polio, which has now been eradicated in India. What is the Government's assessment of the shortfalls of the global vaccine action plan as set out in the 2015 assessment of the strategic advisory group?

Justine Greening: We have seen the group's report, and we think it addresses some key issues and is realistic. It is also worth pointing out that the number of cases of polio in the world this year is down to a handful. We are within touching distance of seeing this terrible disease eradicated from our planet for the first time in history.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Last month, I visited Somalia in the horn of Africa to see for myself some of the effects of the drought that has swept southern and eastern Africa and some of the 36 million people facing hunger. I met desperate people who need food, water and shelter. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that this drought does not become a famine?

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady raises an important issue, which underlines the fragility of many countries in Africa which, while on the path to development, face challenges such as El Niño. Specifically in Somalia, we have made additional funding available to tackle this humanitarian crisis to try to do precisely what the hon. Lady suggests, which is so important.

T2. [904839] Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with VSO that the generous amount of money that the British people give in overseas aid has transformed the lives of children throughout the world as well as, in particular, in developing countries?

Justine Greening: Yes, I do. We have supported 11 million children into school over the last five years and distributed 47 million bed nets, which has seen malaria deaths fall by two thirds over the last 15 years. We are helping 60 million people to get access to better water and sanitation. VSO, of course, is delivering a fantastic project for the International Citizen Service, too.

T3. [904838] Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): People are fleeing war zones in developing countries across the globe. Will the Government now heed Lord Dubs and Sir Erich Reich, two prominent Kindertransport children, and think again about providing sanctuary for unaccompanied child refugees from Syria?

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady will be aware of all the work that DFID has done in Syria and in the region, and it has been particularly focused on supporting children affected by that crisis. We should be proud of the fact that no member state has done more financially to support refugees arriving in Europe. As she will be aware, we are looking at how to continue to work harder on ensuring that we support children who are in Europe and unaccompanied.

T5. [904841] David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that her commendable efforts to improve sexual equality across the world would be made easier if organisations such as the Blackburn Muslim Association were not putting out information to people that women should not be allowed to travel more than 48 miles without a male chaperone?

Justine Greening: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s question. I had a look at its website last night and, frankly, the view expressed on it is disgraceful and unacceptable. It has no place in Britain, and it is contrary to our British values. I think the Blackburn Muslim Association should very clearly and publicly withdraw those comments.

T4. [904840] Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Secretary of State may be aware of the brutal murder of LGBT activist Xulhaz Mannan in Bangladesh last month. He was hacked to death by Islamist activists. Is she aware that Amnesty International says that his was just one of four such murders last month? Will she tell me what we are doing to help the Government of Bangladesh to offer more protection to the LGBT community there?

Justine Greening: The right hon. Gentleman has been as concerned as I have been about some of the terrible murders that have taken place in Bangladesh. It is important that we continue to work with the Bangladeshi Government to ensure that there is freedom of speech combined with the rule of law, and that the perpetrators of the murders are brought to justice.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [904862] Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 4 May.

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): I know that the whole House will wish to join me in congratulating Leicester City on winning the premier league title. Having been 5,000:1 outsiders at the start of the season, they have shown superb ability, incredible resilience and a great team ethic.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.
**Oral Answers**

**Martyn Day:** May I begin by associating myself with the Prime Minister’s comments about Leicester City? That result is something on which he and I can agree.

On Monday, the Foreign Secretary said: “There is a need for a new initiative in the Syria dialogue to keep it alive.”

Will the Prime Minister withdraw his airstrikes, which have done nothing to bring about peace, and will he redouble his efforts to secure a political resolution to the war through a new dialogue, as recommended by his own Foreign Secretary?

**The Prime Minister:** I think that we should do both. I think that we should continue to hit Daesh terrorists because they threaten our country, but at the same time we must do everything that we can to support dialogue between the opposition and the Syrian regime, which is what the progress has been about. We will continue to take both those steps.

Q2. [904863] Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that 33 Conservative candidates will stand in the Lincoln city elections tomorrow, along with our county’s police and crime commissioner candidate—and Labour will lose some seats!

All of us in Lincoln are aware of the need for tolerance and the stamping out of racism and anti-Semitism, especially in view of my Labour predecessor’s current role on the Board of Deputies. Will my right hon. Friend join me, and all our Conservative colleagues, in condemning the actions and propaganda of Hezbollah and Hamas?

**The Prime Minister:** I certainly wish my hon. Friend’s candidates well. If people want to have well-run services at a good cost and keep taxes down, it is right for them to vote Conservative throughout the country.

My hon. Friend’s point about Hamas is important. We should be clear about who they are. They are a terrorist group who believe in killing Jews, and that is why whatever the Leader of the Opposition says about combating anti-Semitism in the Labour party will mean nothing until he withdraws the remark that they were his friends. He needs to do that, and he should do it today.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in congratulating Leicester City on their amazing achievement. I hope that what he has said is not an indication that he is going to support another football team, rather than sticking with the two that he has already.

Later today, commemorations begin for Holocaust Memorial Day in Israel. I hope that it is agreed in all parts of the House that we should send our best wishes to those who are commemorating the occasion, and also send a very clear statement that anti-Semitism has no place in our society whatsoever and we all have a duty to oppose it.

Tomorrow people will go to the polls to vote in council elections in England. Nine of the 10 most deprived councils are set to see cuts higher than the national average, and eight face cuts more than three times the national average. That means less money for youth services, for adult social care, and for those in the areas with the greatest need. The Prime Minister used to say, “We are all in it together.” What happened to that?

**The Prime Minister:** First, I join the right hon. Gentleman in saying that we should always support Holocaust Memorial Day, whether here in the UK, where we have a number of commemorations, or in Israel. But I am going to press him on this point, because he said: “it will be my pleasure and my honour to host an event in parliament where our friends from Hezbollah will be speaking... I’ve also invited friends from Hamas to come and speak as well.”

Hamas and Hezbollah believe in killing Jews, not just in Israel but around the world. Will he take this opportunity? If he wants to clear up the problem of anti-Semitism in the Labour party, now is a good time to start: withdraw the remark that they are your friends.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** I have made it very clear that Labour is an anti-racist party and that there is no place for anti-Semitism within it. We have suspended any members who have undertaken any anti-Semitic activities or work or made such statements, and have established an inquiry led by Shami Chakrabarti. The point the Prime Minister makes relates to a discussion I was hosting to try to promote a peace process. It was not an approval of those organisations. I absolutely do not approve of those organisations.

The reality is that vulnerable people are being abandoned in this country. The Prime Minister has said that social care and support for the elderly were a priority for him. If that is the case, why has he cut £4.5 billion since 2010 from the adult social care budget, leaving 300,000 older people without the care and support they need to live in dignity?

**The Prime Minister:** First, we are putting more money into social care and allowing councils to raise council tax to put that money in.

I am afraid the right hon. Gentleman will have to do this one more time. He referred to Hamas and Hezbollah as his friends. He needs to withdraw that remark. Let me give him another chance: are they your friends or are they not? Those organisations, in their constitutions, believe in persecuting and killing Jews. They are anti-Semitic and racist organisations, and he must stand up and say they are not his friends.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Obviously, anyone who commits racist attacks or who is anti-Semitic is not a friend of mine. I am very clear about that. I invite the Prime Minister to think for a moment about the conduct of his party and his candidate in the London mayoral elections and their systematic smearing of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan), our candidate for Mayor. I wish him well, and I invite the Prime Minister to undertake to ensure that the Conservative party in London desists from its present activities in smearing my friend.

Last week, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s “Destitution” report found that 1.25 million people in Britain were unable to afford the essentials needed to eat and stay warm, clean and dry. The number of people using food banks rose again last year. The Prime
Minister usually lectures us about a stronger economy. When will that stronger economy mean that fewer people need to use food banks?

The Prime Minister: What the stronger economy means is that there are over 2 million more people in work than when I became Prime Minister, and that someone can now earn £11,000 before paying tax; and we have introduced a national living wage—something never done in 13 years of a Labour Government.

I completely reject the right hon. Gentleman’s comments about Labour’s candidate for the London mayoralty. As I have said before at the Dispatch Box, we are not responsible for everything someone says when they share a platform with us, and we cannot control everyone who appears in a picture, but there is a pattern of behaviour with the right hon. Member. For Tooting (Sadiq Khan). He shared a platform with Sajil Shahid, the man who trained the ringleader of the 7/7 attacks and accused the United States of bringing 9/11 on itself. He shared a platform with an extremist who called for Jews to be drowned in the ocean. When this was put to the right hon. Member for Tooting, he described it as mere “flowery” language. If the leader of the Opposition wants to know why he has a problem with anti-Semitism, let me tell him: it is because his candidates share platform after platform with extremists and anti-Semites and then excuse their words. One more time: say you withdraw the remark about Hamas and Hezbollah being your friends.

Jeremy Corbyn: Last week, the Prime Minister tried, as he often does, to smear my right hon. Friend the Member for Tooting for his association with Sulaiman Ghani. It turns out that Mr Ghani is actually an active Conservative supporter who has shared platforms with the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith). The Prime Minister should also reflect on the words of Lord Lansley some years ago when he said that racism was “endemic” within his party. We have set up a commission of inquiry; I suggest that the Prime Minister might think about doing the same thing.

Lord Kerslake, the former Government housing chief, has said that the Housing and Planning Bill “effectively removes the security that people need”, and that it is “fundamentally wrong”. Homelessness is up by a third since the right hon. Gentleman became Prime Minister, and it is rising again this year. A voter, Malcolm, wrote to me this week to say that he and his family will lose their home if the Government’s Housing Bill goes through. Why can the Prime Minister not follow the example set by the Welsh Labour Government by placing a legal duty and responsibility on councils to help people during a housing crisis? Why cannot he do that?

The Prime Minister: I will tell the right hon. Gentleman what this Government have done, not in Wales where Labour is in control but here in England: we have built twice as much council housing in the last six years as Labour did in the previous 13.

But I am not going to let the issue about the right hon. Member for Tooting rest. The Leader of the Opposition raised the case of Sulaiman Ghani, whom the right hon. Member for Tooting shared a platform with nine times. This is a man who says that it is wrong to stop people going to fight in—[Interruption.] No, as long as it takes. Do you want to know the views of a person that your leader has just quoted? He has described women as—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) might be interested in this. He described women as “subservient” to men. He said that homosexuality was an “unnatural” act. He stood on a platform with people who wanted an Islamic state. That is why the Leader of the Opposition’s attempts to deal with anti-Semitism are utterly condemned to failure. He will not even condemn people who sit on platforms with people like that.

Jeremy Corbyn: I did point out to the Prime Minister—I was trying to help him—that the gentleman concerned is actually a Conservative. Maybe he would care to think about that. He might also consider that Shazia Awan, a former Conservative parliamentary candidate, has said this of the Tory mayoral campaign:

“T’ll be voting Labour. A lifelong Tory voter and ex-candidate, I’m ashamed at the repulsive campaign of hate”.

Homelessness has been reduced by 67% in Wales since the new regulations came in. Why can the Prime Minister not do the same in this country? Inequality is getting worse. Education ought to be a route out of poverty, but new figures show that the number of people participating in a level 2 adult education course in the first half of this year fell by a fifth compared with last year. How can we tackle inequality when the Prime Minister and his Government are taking away the opportunities for people to find a pathway out of poverty?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about inequality, but inequality has gone down under this Government. There are 764,000 fewer workless households and 449,000 fewer children living in workless households. Why? Because we have a growing economy, a living wage, more jobs and people paying less tax. That is what is happening under this Government. Once again I say to him that we are investing in schools to give people opportunities and in schemes to allow people to own homes to give them opportunities. He opposes all those things because the truth is this: he may be a friend of the terrorist group Hamas but he is an enemy of aspiration.

Jeremy Corbyn: Politics is about choices. The Prime Minister cut—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me gently say to the assiduous but slightly over-enthusiastic Government Whip, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), that his role is to be seen and not heard—no further noise, please, from the hon. Gentleman today or from the sidekick to his right. A cabal of Whips will not shout people down in this Chamber. Be quiet or leave; it is very simple.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister’s Government cut income tax for the richest, cut capital gains tax, and cut corporation tax again and again. At every turn, they make the wrong choices. Tomorrow, people can make their own choices about the crisis of social care, the housing crisis in this country, the unprecedented cuts to local councils in the areas of greatest need, and the cuts to further education, taking opportunities away from young people. The choices have been made. The
Government cut taxes for the rich; we want proper taxation to ensure that there are decent services for the rest.

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman is right that tomorrow is about choices. People can choose a party that is on the side of security for hard-working people and that wants to ensure that there are more jobs, better pay, lower taxes, good schools for their children, and a seven-day NHS that is there for them when they need it. Their other choice is to back a party that puts extremists over working people and that is utterly incapable of providing the leadership that their local council or our country needs.

Q5. **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that in order to create a northern powerhouse that can produce innovation and prosperity, investment is needed in vital transport links in our northern cities? Of particular concern to my constituents is the junction of the A34 and the A560 at Gatley. Will the Prime Minister and his Ministers meet me to discuss how we can keep traffic moving into and out of the great city of Manchester and alleviate congestion in my constituency of Cheadle?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. We established Transport for the North to look exactly at schemes such as the one that she proposes, so that we can speak with one voice. We are also investing £13 billion in transport across the north over this Parliament. Planning for the next road investment strategy for after 2020 is also now under way, so it is absolutely the right time for her to make that point.

**Angus Robertson** (Moray) (SNP): Last week, the Prime Minister took issue when I mentioned unaccompanied Syrian refugee children in Europe and the Kindertransport of the 1930s. Since then, he has been written to by Sir Erich Reich, the chairman of the Association of Jewish Refugees’ Kindertransport special interest group, who said:

“The echoes of the past haunt many of my fellow Kinder and I whose fate similarly rested with members of the British parliament. I feel it is incumbent on us to once again demonstrate our compassion and human-kindness to provide sanctuary to those in need.”

Why has it taken so long, and the threat of a parliamentary defeat, for the Prime Minister to begin changing his mind?

**The Prime Minister:** First, let me pay tribute to the gentleman mentioned by the right hon. Gentleman. Let us be clear that no country has done more than Britain to help when it comes to Syrian refugees. No country has raised more money, and only the United States has spent more money. I want us to proceed with as much support from across the House as we can. I think it is right to stick to the principle that we should not be encouraging people to make this dangerous journey. I think it is right to stick to the idea that we keep investing in the refugee camps and in neighbouring countries. I also think it is right not to take part in the EU relocation and resettlement schemes, which have been, in my view, a failure.

We are already taking child migrants in Europe with a direct family connection to the UK, and we will speed that up. I am also talking to Save the Children to see what more we can do, particularly with children who came here before the EU-Turkey deal was signed, because I say again that I do not want us to take steps that will encourage people to make this dangerous journey. Otherwise, our actions, however well-meaning they will be, could result in more people dying, rather than more people getting a good life.

**Angus Robertson:** Last week, I accused the Prime Minister of walking by on the other side when he stoutly defended his then policy, opposing further help for unaccompanied refugee children in Europe. If what we are hearing now is the beginnings of a U-turn, I very much welcome it, as I am sure do Members from all parts of the House. May I encourage him to think more about what can be done, given that the Kindertransport helped 10,000 children from Europe? Finally, may I ask him to take the opportunity to thank Lord Alf Dubs and all campaigners who have worked so hard for the UK to live up to the example and the spirit of the Kindertransport?

**The Prime Minister:** I certainly think that all those people deserve recognition for the work they have done to put this issue so squarely on the agenda, but let me say again that I reject the comparison with the Kindertransport. I do so for this reason: I would argue that what we are doing primarily—taking children from the region, taking vulnerable people from the camps, going to the neighbouring countries and taking people into our country, housing them, clothing them, feeding them and making sure they can have a good life here—is like the Kindertransport. I think that to say that the Kindertransport is like taking children today from France, Germany or Italy—safe countries that are democracies—is an insult to those countries. But, as I have said, because of the steps we are taking, it will not be necessary to send the Dubs amendment back to the other place; the amendment does not now mention a number of people. We are going to go around the local authorities and see what more we can do, but let us stick to the principle that we should not be taking new arrivals to Europe.

Q7. **Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): The Department of Health is looking to introduce a cell-free DNA test for pregnant women in order to reduce the number of miscarriages, but this will have the unintended consequence of increasing the number of abortions for those with Down’s syndrome. I know that nobody in this House cares more about the protection and safety of those with special needs, so will the Prime Minister meet me and representatives of the East Lancashire Down’s Syndrome Support Group so that we can look at ways of protecting those with Down’s syndrome and ensuring that they will not be simply screened out?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. A local group of Down’s syndrome parents came to my constituency surgery on Friday and made all these arguments to me. As a constituency MP, I am taking this up with the Department of Health to make sure that all the right processes are followed. There are moral and ethical issues that need to be
considered in these cases, but on the other hand we also have to respect the view that women want to have screening and testing about the health of their children, and we should be in favour of maximum transparency, on the basis that this is optional rather than mandatory, but it is part of routine care. So the Health Secretary is going to have to find a way through this, but, above all, we must make sure we go about it in the right way.

The Prime Minister: I think we should listen to all the business voices, particularly those in manufacturing, so many of whom say that we are better off in a reformed European Union. We get an enormous amount of investment, particularly from Japanese motor industries. I will be welcoming the Japanese Prime Minister here to the UK tomorrow, when I am sure this will be on the agenda.

Peace in Europe: Assessment of EU’s Contribution

Q12. [904874] Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the extent of the contribution of the EU to the maintenance of peace in Europe.

The Prime Minister: NATO is the cornerstone of Britain’s defence, but our place in the EU is, in my view, a vital part of protecting our national security. I would argue that it helps in two ways: first, by ensuring that issues are settled by dialogue; and secondly, by helping to provide assistance in particular circumstances—for example, the Balkans.

Dr Lewis: I entirely agree with the Prime Minister’s remarks about NATO, but does he accept that although dictatorships often attack democracies or other dictatorships, democracies seldom, if ever, go to war with each other? If an aim of the EU is, as we are constantly told, to prevent conflict between its own members, as in world war one and world war two, is it not heading in precisely the wrong direction by trying to create an unelected, supranational Government of Europe that is accountable to nobody?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend has long-standing and passionate views on this issue. Let me make a couple of points in response. First, we should not forget that, until very recently, some countries now in the European Union were not democracies, but forms of dictatorship. Secondly, those countries that have worked towards membership of the EU have had to put in place all sorts of democratic and other norms to help them on their way. Finally, we have had an unparalleled period of peace and prosperity in Europe. My argument is that whether we attribute all of that to NATO or some of that to the EU, why would we want to put it at risk?

Engagements

Q6. [904867] Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The findings of the NHS England report on the sudden closure of Bootham Park mental health hospital in York have confirmed that the relationships between the NHS bodies, as defined under the Health and Social Care Act 2012, are dysfunctional and have failed patient safety. A Healthwatch report showed that harm has occurred because life has been lost. Will the Prime Minister now accept that, because of the serious risk that has been created, the 2012 Act has to change in line with NHS England’s recommendations?

The Prime Minister: I will look very carefully at what the hon. Lady has said. My understanding is that she called for action on an outdated and dangerous facility back in July last year, and that is exactly what happened. I am pleased that action was taken. Bootham Park was not fit for purpose. The Care Quality Commission identified serious and life-threatening issues on patient safety, which were not put right. As a result, there was a decision to close and then subsequently reopen the facility after changes. Of course there will be incidences of poor practice; what matters is whether we intervene fast enough and put them right. In this case, I will look again at what she says, but it does look as if action was taken.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Christian Yazidi and Shia children in Syria are suffering from genocide carried out by Daesh, and we should recognise it as such. May I urge the Prime Minister to do more to replicate the Kindertransport of the 1930s? That is what we are doing in taking children directly from the camps in Syria. If we were to take 16-year-olds from a safe environment in Europe, we would simply be causing more misery and encouraging the people traffickers.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has asked me two questions. One is whether there is more we can do to label what has happened as genocide. That has always been done under a legal definition, but there is a very strong case here for saying that it is genocide, and I hope that it will be portrayed and spoken of as such.

On the issue of the Kindertransport, I agree with my hon. Friend. We have an enormous amount of which we can be proud—the money that we have put into the camps, and the fact that we raised more in London on one day than any humanitarian conference has ever raised in the history of the world. We have a very strong record. We will do more for children who were already registered in Europe before the EU-Turkey deal, but the principle that we should try to cling to is that we should not do anything that encourages people traffickers.

Q8. [904869] Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): For the benefit of the House and for 10 and 11-year-olds up and down the country, will the Prime Minister explain which of the past progressive tense is? Will he differentiate between a subordinating conjunctive and a co-ordinating conjunctive? Finally, will he set out his definition of a modal verb?
The Prime Minister: The whole point of these changes is to make sure that our children are better educated than we are. That is why I am absolutely delighted that my three children at state schools are going off to do these tests.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Three years ago—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear Mr Vickers’s inquiry.

Martin Vickers: Three years ago, five members of the Cockburn family from County Durham were killed in a tragic accident on the A18 in my constituency. At the recently concluded inquest, the coroner said that he had no confidence that the proposed work by the highway authority would remedy the situation. Obviously the council wants to do all it can, and has committed to carry out the work in full. However, resources are very limited. Will my right hon. Friend give serious consideration to an application from the council for additional resources to avoid a future tragedy?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly have a very close look at the issue that my hon. Friend raises. I know the A18 and its importance for his constituency, and I will look at what the Highways Agency has made available and at whether there is real evidence that more could be done to make the road safe.

Q9. [904870] Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Eritrea was described as the North Korea of Africa at the recent inaugural all-party group meeting, which heard reports of Government-enforced indefinite conscription. The UK FCO advises against travel to areas within 25 km of the Ethiopian border. Will the Prime Minister personally and urgently review Home Office guidance that says that it is safe to transport asylum seekers back to Eritrea?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly consider what the hon. Gentleman says. We know that Eritrea is a deeply undemocratic and autocratic country that has done appalling things to its people and that is one reason why so many of those seeking to cross the Mediterranean, normally through the Libyan route, have come from that country. When I had the opportunity to meet the Eritrean leadership, as I did at the conference in Valletta in Malta, I made those points very strongly.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Four years ago, I asked my right hon. Friend on behalf of my mother, Maud, whether the EU referendum vote could be brought forward because of her age. She was then 100. She now wishes to know whether she needs to set a world record for longevity before the Chilcot report is published.

The Prime Minister: I think that I can reassure Maud that this summer she will have a double opportunity to deal with these things, with a referendum on 23 June and the Chilcot report, which, I am sure, will come not too much longer after that.

Mr Speaker: I rather imagine that she will then want a Backbench Business Committee debate on the matter.

Q10. [904872] Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Tata Steel has indicated that it wishes to complete the sale of its UK assets by the middle of June and that it wants a preferred bidder in place by the end of this month. Does the Prime Minister really think that that is a realistic timeframe and that there will be a credible process of due diligence? What steps is the Prime Minister taking to ensure that Tata Steel delivers on its promise to be a responsible seller?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about this. The positive news is that the deadline yesterday was met by a number of serious inquiries of interest into buying all of Tata, and that is good news. Obviously, we now need to work intensively with Tata and those buyers to get that list down to those who seriously intend to bid for the business. The hon. Gentleman is right that it is a very short timetable. He asks what we are doing, and what we are doing is talking intensively with Tata to ensure that it does everything it can to make sure that this is a serious sales process.

Sir Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): The Prime Minister just made a very important announcement about refugee children, but obviously time is of the essence because of the peculiar vulnerability of children without the guidance and protection of their families. Will the Prime Minister indicate to the House how quickly he expects to have those arrangements in place?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who has spoken powerfully and passionately about this issue. I do not see any reason why there needs to be a long delay. We need to carry out conversations with local councils, because many of them, particularly in the south of England, are already under pressure owing to the number of child refugees who have already come. We need to carry out those conversations, but hopefully we can then make progress during this year.

Q11. [904873] Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Documents leaked earlier this week appear to confirm what most have feared: that the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership makes unacceptable concessions in respect of public health and safety regulations, opening the doors for US investors to sue for loss of profits. Will the Prime Minister recognise the concern raised by the French President and tell this House what protections his Government are seeking for the national health service and public services?

The Prime Minister: This is the reddest of red herrings, I have to say. The health service is completely protected under this agreement, as it is under others. There are all sorts of reasons why people might be against free trade and wanting to see an expansion of trade, investment and jobs, but I think people ought to be honest about it and say that they do not want to see those things happen, rather than finding total red herrings to get in the way of something that could add tens of billion pounds to our economy and bring jobs and investment to our country—[Interruption.]
Mr Speaker: Calm yourself, Mr Campbell. You are supposed to be a senior statesman in the House. Calm down. Take up yoga, as I have told you before.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Looe Lifeboats in my constituency celebrates its 150th anniversary this year. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating and thanking not only the Looe lifeboat men, but all the lifeboat men who keep us safe at sea?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to do that in conjunction with my hon. Friend. Lifeboat men are incredibly brave people. Having met some of them, particularly during the flood episodes that we have had in recent years, I know the immense professionalism and dedication that they bring to the task, and they put their lives at risk all the time to save others. They really are the bravest of the brave.

Fixed-term Parliaments

Q13. [904875] Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect on the performance of Government of the introduction of five-year fixed-term Parliaments; and if he will make a statement.

The Prime Minister: What matters is what works and allows the Government to make long-term decisions in the long-term interests of the country. In my view, five-year fixed-term Parliaments are an important part of that.

Mr Allen: Will the Prime Minister ensure that his Government’s performance includes the long-overdue creation of a centre of evidence on sexual abuse of children—something that I first raised in Prime Minister’s questions with Margaret Thatcher in 1989? We can deal with the awful consequences of child sex abuse for victims and perpetrators, but we must also use early intervention expertise to stop it happening in the first place. Will the Prime Minister back the excellent work of Ministers and Members from all parties and get this much-needed What Works centre up and running without delay, within the five-year term of this Government?

Mr Speaker: I am glad the hon. Gentleman rescued his own question with those last words. We are grateful to him, constitutionally at least.

The Prime Minister: I am sorry that it has taken so long for a question in 1989 to get an answer, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman. A quarter of children who are sexually abused by their own family suffers something that they first raised in Prime Minister’s questions with Margaret Thatcher in 1989. We will deal with the awful consequences of child sex abuse for victims and perpetrators, but we must also use early intervention expertise to stop it happening in the first place. Will the Prime Minister back the excellent work of Ministers and Members from all parties and get this much-needed What Works centre up and running without delay, within the five-year term of this Government?

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Mr John Baron (Basingstoke and Basingstoke) (Con): The Prime Minister and we on the Government Benches can be very proud of the fact that in recent years we have reduced both relative poverty and income inequality. We are a one nation party or we are nothing. Does the Prime Minister agree with Lord Rose, the leader of the Remain campaign, that if we were to leave the EU and devolve greater control over immigration in the sake of public services, wages would rise even faster?

The Prime Minister: If we were to leave the EU, I think we would see an impact on our economy that would be largely negative. That is not just my view; that is the view now of the Bank of England, the International Monetary Fund, the OECD and a growing number of international bodies. I would say to anybody who wants to make that choice that obviously it is a choice for the British people to make, but we have to be clear about the economic consequences.

Engagements

Q14. [904876] Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): In 1972, my constituent Susan Lee, aged just 19, having been married for nine months, and six months pregnant with their first child, received a knock on the door to say that her husband Private James Lee had been killed in action in Northern Ireland. When Susan, now Rimmer, married and found love again, she lost all compensation for her and her daughter Donna-Marie, and she still has no compensation for having made that huge sacrifice. That is a disgraceful way to treat those who have lost loved ones who were serving our country. Will the Prime Minister meet me and Mrs Rimmer to discuss this case and the injustice that still faces several hundred more widows in this country?

The Prime Minister: I will make sure that Susan Rimmer gets the meeting and the attention that she deserves. I know that the Minister with responsibility for defence personnel and veterans, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North, met the War Widows Association earlier this year so that it could put forward its case. Of course, it was this Government who made a historic change so that war widows who remarried, from 1 April 2015, would retain their war widow’s pension. That was a change long asked for and only delivered under this Government. We will continue to look at this issue, but at present we are of the view—this is the long-standing policy of successive Governments—that we should not make these changes and apply them retrospectively.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Yesterday the Foreign Affairs Committee started our inquiry on Anglo-Russian relations. This afternoon I have a Westminster Hall debate on Anglo-Russian relations. Despite all the tensions between our two countries, will the Prime Minister give us an assurance that he will redouble his efforts to try to lower tensions with that fellow permanent member of the UN Security Council?

The Prime Minister: Of course we want to keep tensions low, and of course we want to have good relations, but we cannot ignore the fact that Russia-backed and directed separatists have effectively tried to redraw the boundaries of Europe. When we consider how dangerous such exercises have been in the past, we have to take them extremely seriously in the present.
Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I thank the Prime Minister for joining Leicestershire MPs and the rest of the planet in congratulating Leicester City football club on their brilliant and historic success in the premier league? During this amazing season, local Leicester hero, Gary Lineker, thought the idea of Leicester winning the league was so far-fetched that he said he would present “Match of the Day” in his underwear if they won. Does the Prime Minister, as an Aston Villa supporter—my commiserations to him on their season—agree that, in politics as well as in football, when people make a promise, they should keep it?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree. I have been watching everything Gary Lineker has said since, and he is not quite answering the question—something that, of course, no one ever gets away with in this House. I welcome what the right hon. Gentleman has said; obviously, I hope it is just the start of him joining the blue team.
Dublin System: Asylum

12.41 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on reforms to the Dublin agreement and the effects on asylum.

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): This morning the European Commission published its proposal for reform of the Dublin protocol and emergency relocation in response to the migration crisis in the Mediterranean. The proposals were first announced under the EU-Turkey deal, and agreement is critical to finding a solution for Europe’s asylum systems ahead of the summer. The Government will now scrutinise the proposals carefully.

As the House will be aware, the UK has an opt-in to any EU proposals on justice and home affairs issues. It is not bound to sign up to the proposals the Commission has published today; we will have three months to consider whether to do so. The proposals will be laid before Parliament, and an explanatory memorandum will be provided. Scrutiny Committees in both Houses will look at the issue in detail, and Parliament will be able to consider the proposals in the usual way.

The Government strongly support the principles behind the Dublin regulation. We believe that an asylum claim made in the EU should be dealt with by the member state most responsible for the applicant’s presence in the EU. This provides certainty for the applicant and protects other member states’ asylum systems from abuse. But our starting position is clear: we will not opt into any legislative proposal that replaces the existing Dublin principles with a redistribution mechanism, and we do not support relocation. Those in need of protection should claim asylum in the first safe country they reach.

In this context, it is worth noting that the Commission has been very clear today that, should we not opt into the revised Dublin regulations, the existing regulations will continue to apply between the UK and other member states, and this is at least partly a direct result of the Government’s engagement with the Commission and other member states. As such, there is no risk that we would lose our existing powers to return people to other EU member states—powers that we have used nearly 12,000 times since 2005.

Where an individual is the responsibility of another EU member state under EU law, the Government seek to return them under the Dublin regulations—and we will continue to do so. We have been engaged in regular constructive conversations with our European counterparts and the European Commission, and will participate fully in the negotiations on this draft proposal at European level. I commend this statement to the House.

Mrs Main: I thank the Minister for his statement, although I am somewhat concerned that it will be three months before we know what this will look like in practice. Will we know what this will look like in three months before we know what this will look like in the summer. The Government will now scrutinise the proposals carefully.

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Mrs Main: I thank the Minister for his statement, although I am somewhat concerned that it will be three months before we know what this will look like in reality, given that we have a very important referendum coming up in that time.

The Minister said in February that the Dublin agreement "should be upheld, not undermined."—[Official Report, 29 February 2016, Vol. 606, c. 689.]

In theory, the Dublin asylum regulations ensure that EU countries can deport refugees to their first port of entry, as he just re-confirmed. The Secretary of State recently restated her view:

“that amending the Dublin regulation is unnecessary and risks undermining a vital tool in managing asylum claims within the EU.”—[Official Report, 2 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 21WS.]

However, the EU Commission is pressing ahead with reforms despite her views, and despite many European countries expressing their extreme disquiet. Under the existing rules, Britain ostensibly, as the Minister said, has the right to deport asylum seekers to their first port of entry. However, in practice that means—he gave a figure—that only 1% of asylum seekers from the UK each year have been relocated to the first port of entry, according to Eurostat. Does he accept that this very low figure of only 1% for relocations is accurate? If so, will he explain why the UK is performing so badly under the current regulations?

In practice, the Dublin agreement is very far from perfect, and the EU is desperate to find ways of evening out the strains from the large numbers of asylum seekers, as well as of not rocking the British boat before our referendum. Even the European Commission has acknowledged that the current Dublin system does not work. Germany has all but abandoned it, and Greece has apparently not abided by it since 2011. The Commission has stated:

“Even where Member States accept transfer requests, only about a quarter of such cases result in effective transfers, and, after completion of a transfer, there are frequent cases of secondary movements back to the transferring Member State”.

Does the Minister accept that even with relocations as low as 1%, we are often obliged to re-admit individuals under the secondary transfer process? Does he have figures for the House on how many are relocated back to the United Kingdom? Given the low numbers sent back to the first port of entry under this system, and the fact that many of them return, does he still believe that this is a good deal for Britain? Despite the haggling and horse-trading going on behind closed doors as we speak, has the Secretary of State secured a permanent and favourable opt-out from any form of quota sharing—an opt-out that cannot be overruled at any point in future by other member countries? It is important to know that at this moment.

These proposals are part of a package to try to manage the surge in migrants and refugees flooding into Europe. The Commission is in the process of proposing measures revising the terms of the Dublin regulation—namely, imposing a financial penalty of €250,000 for every refugee not taken by a country if another member state experiences a sudden influx. How will this new quota/penalty system proposal sit with the current Dublin III proposal that the Minister says he wishes to stay within? Has he secured a permanent and favourable opt-out from any form of penalty payment that might be negotiated in future for non-acceptance of quotas—one that could not be overruled at any point in future by other member countries?

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the Minister responds, two points should be made. First, I say in all courtesy and gently to the hon. Lady that she modestly exceeded her time allocation, but I am sure that that was inadvertent and will not be repeated on subsequent occasions.
Secondly, equally courteously and gently, I say to the Minister, with reference to his final sentence commending his statement to the House, that he did not make a statement to the House. The Government could perfectly well have volunteered a statement to the House, but the reason the right hon. Gentleman is in the Chamber is that I required a Minister to attend the Chamber to answer the urgent question—capital U, capital Q—from the hon. Lady. It may seem a fine distinction to those attending our proceedings, but it is quite an important one. The right hon. Gentleman is here involuntarily and not voluntarily. I hope the position is now clear.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Deport him!

Mr Speaker: No, he does not need to be deported—we want him to answer the question.

James Brokenshire: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am always the servant of the House in this regard.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) has raised various points. The UK has a very clear opt-in arrangement in relation to justice and home affairs matters and we retain firm control over the ability to decide which matters to opt into, as I explained clearly in my opening comments.

The existing Dublin regulations provide a significant benefit. As I have said, we have used the process to remove nearly 12,000 people from the UK to other EU member states over the past 10 years.

My hon. Friend asked whether we may subsequently be bound by, or be required to be participants in, the new arrangements. I point her to a specific statement in the European Commission’s press release:

“...the UK and Ireland are not required but instead determine themselves the extent to which they want to participate in these measures, in accordance with the relevant Protocols attached to the Treaties. If they do not opt in, the current rules as they operate today will continue to apply to them, in line with the Treaties.”

That provides the important clarification and certainty sought by my hon. Friend. Clearly, that provides protection in relation to whether or not we decide to opt into certain matters, including the quota penalty, to which she referred.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Let us be clear from the start: through our opt-out on home affairs and justice, Britain would not be required to take part in any asylum relocation system, nor would we be required to pay any financial levy to avoid it. Let us also be clear, however, that we have a keen national interest and a moral responsibility to ensure that effective systems are in place to tackle the worst humanitarian crisis in Europe in a decade. A humanitarian crisis on this scale clearly needs a concerted EU-wide response.

It is clear that the Dublin arrangements are not working on the ground. They are not able to cope with the numbers or process the claims. For those precise reasons, Labour has been calling for many months for a reconsideration of how the Dublin arrangements work in practice. The Government, as ever, have been slow and reluctant to act, as characterised by the Minister’s involuntary appearance here today.

Labour is also clear that the key Dublin principles preventing first country states from refusing to process asylum seekers and allowing return to first country are important. We welcome the Government’s update on that, but what reform proposals have they made to the Commission?

There is also the wider and key question of unaccompanied children in Europe. Today the chair of the Association of Jewish Refugees called on the Prime Minister to do more to help what he called “the most vulnerable victims” of the Syrian conflict. We cannot continue to sit on our hands or to be subject to the repugnant rhetoric that these children in Europe are safe—they are not. There is a groundswell of support. When will the Government finally listen? If there is to be a U-turn, the sooner it happens, the better.

James Brokenshire: The hon. and learned Gentleman clearly did not hear what the Prime Minister said at Prime Minister’s Question Time just a few moments ago. He said that we are in discussions with Save the Children and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees about what further assistance can be provided to those who had already registered in Europe before the EU-Turkey deal came into force. He also mentioned the discussions that we will have with local authorities.

I reject entirely the hon. and learned Gentleman’s claim that the Government have been slow to act on the Dublin regulations. We have sent experts to France and other European countries to support that process, to enable its practical implementation on the ground, and to ensure that it bears fruit and speeds up.

The hon. and learned Gentleman highlighted issues relating to the Dublin regulations. The Government believe that the long-standing principles at the heart of the Dublin system are the right ones, and it would be a major error to tear them up and replace them with something completely different. Dublin may not be operating as it should be, but that does not mean that its principles are fundamentally flawed. That is the approach that this Government will take to further negotiation.

Right hon. and hon. Members will not have seen the proposals in detail, because they have only just been published. It is right, therefore, that we reflect on them in detail and continue our discussions in order to ensure a reformed Dublin system that benefits the UK, while acknowledging the protections we have to maintain the existing Dublin arrangements.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) not only on securing the urgent question, but on the manner in which she conducted her analysis. She was, of course, completely right. The European Scrutiny Committee is looking at this very matter and we will be talking about it this afternoon. Would the Minister be good enough to give us an assurance that, if we so decide, which I feel we will, that there should be a debate on the Floor of the House, he would encourage that with the Whips? Will he also make sure that the matter is not left hanging around for as long as three months? We need urgent answers to these questions.

James Brokenshire: The three-month period is the time the UK has to consider whether to opt into measures at the outset. As my hon. Friend will know, that is one of our protections in our relationship with the EU with
regard to justice and home affairs matters. The Commission has published its papers this morning and I am sure that they will be scrutinised in detail by the European Scrutiny Committee. The Minister visited. The Government will provide information and support that process in order to ensure that the measure is properly scrutinised by the House. There is no delay on the Government’s part: the three-month period is our safeguard in deciding whether to opt in, and it certainly does not defer scrutiny.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Dublin rules were not fit for purpose, even before the current crisis in Europe developed, and that crisis has pushed the system way beyond breaking point. Even a child would understand that front-line countries such as Greece and Italy cannot be expected to deal alone with all the asylum seekers who arrive there. The proposed system of financial penalties would be an improvement, but it is a distant second best to the proper sharing of responsibility throughout the European Union. If the United Kingdom is not prepared to sign up to the new EU asylum system, exactly what steps will the Government take in order for the UK to do its bit for those already in Europe, particularly the child refugees?

When I was in Calais with other Scottish National party MPs at Easter, we met many refugees with family in the UK, and we met men who had acted as interpreters for the UK armed forces, including men who had been at Camp Bastion at the same time as Prince Harry and when the Prime Minister visited. The Government keep assuring us that they are taking action to speed up the processing of take charge requests, once they receive them. Will the Minister now provide us with the figures on processing times that we have repeatedly asked for, so that we can have some evidence that those take charge requests are being dealt with more speedily?

More fundamentally, there is a real problem with the French side of things being handled slowly and the fact that many of the refugees in Calais and Dunkirk are afraid to claim asylum in France because of the very bad experiences they have had there already, including being tear-gassed by French authorities. Will the British Government consider providing a route to bypass the French system and allow direct claims to the UK based on family ties?

James Brokenshire: The relevant requests under the existing Dublin arrangements are being processed in a matter of weeks, as I have indicated to the hon. and learned Lady on previous occasions. Direct contact between officials on both sides means that they are able to make speedy decisions and ensure that those who have links to the UK can be reunited. The Government believe in that principle very strongly. We are also providing additional funding to and investment in other parts of Europe, and that work is absolutely intended to support that principle.

The hon. and learned Lady mentioned the French Government’s actions. They have engaged a specific non-governmental organisation, France Terre d’Asile, to identify people in the camps and ensure that they are protected speedily. We support that work and we will continue to support the French Government and play our part in ensuring that those who have a connection to the UK are established, identified and come to the UK quickly.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the migrant crisis that we face is our part of a crisis that affects every European Union member state and requires a European Union solution? It is a complete absurdity, first promulgated by the UK Independence party, that if we left the EU these people would somehow no longer be a problem for us.

As the Government have played a full part in the limited progress so far on closing the outer border of Europe and making arrangements with Turkey for the return of asylum seekers, does the Minister accept that although we are legally quite entitled to insist on the Dublin convention, and of course must exercise our opt-out when it is in our interests, we must have regard to the problems of Greece, Italy and other countries? Those countries have not encouraged these vast numbers of people to come to them, and we will need the co-operation of their Governments if we are eventually to restore order in every member state, including the United Kingdom.

James Brokenshire: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right that this is an EU-wide problem which we will need to continue to address at that level, and that it is clearly not the case that the UK leaving the EU in the referendum would suddenly make the migration crisis go away.

My right hon. and learned Friend mentions Greece and Italy, and he will equally know that the EU-Turkey deal is intended to support efforts on the frontline. From next week we will be sending out about 75 experts to support front-line activity in Greece.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I think that in his heart, the Minister probably accepts everything that the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) said today, including that the Dublin agreement is in crisis not because of the United Kingdom but because other EU countries are flouting the way it operates. The Home Affairs Committee saw that for itself when it visited Greece and Italy. Other partners need to fulfil their obligations under Dublin and deal with matters in their countries so that people do not end up coming to Calais seeking to come over to the United Kingdom. To do that, they need just 10% of the money that has gone to Turkey. The EU-Turkey deal was the most generous in history, but Greece and Italy are the countries that need our support.

James Brokenshire: The right hon. Gentleman will know about the practical support that we are providing through the European Asylum Support Office to front-line states that have seen significant numbers of people arriving on their shores. We have provided £70 million of funding for the Europe-wide response, which is a significant contribution to the activities needed to support vulnerable migrants. He is right that we need to continue the work with Greece and Italy, which is precisely what the Government will do, as we recognise the pressures that those Governments are under.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The EU documents about the EU-Turkey agreement, including the creation of a visa-free area for most of the EU and Turkey, make it clear that strengthening the Turkish frontier with Syria, Iraq and Iran must be part of the revised asylum
and migration policy. Quite remarkably, and rather strangely, the documents say that the EU will help build walls, fences and ditches along what is an extremely long border. Can the Minister tell us how many miles of those impediments to migration the EU has in mind, and what the costs might be?

James Brokenshire: The clear focus is on seeing that refugees do not make the journey across the Mediterranean sea to the shores of Europe, which is consistent with the approach that the Government have taken. It is why we have pledged £2.3 billion to tackling the humanitarian crisis, which is giving people a sense of hope and opportunity through work and education. That is the right approach to show people why they should not be making the journey, and the EU-Turkey deal supports that.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): I know that the Minister is proud of his opt-in, but in reply to the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) he seemed to agree in principle that the refugee crisis is a European crisis that requires collective action. If we had the Brokenshire regulations instead of the Dublin regulations, what exactly would they be?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for framing the question in that way. It underlines the need for each EU member state to play a part, which is precisely what the UK Government are doing. We are providing expert support, funding and a significant contribution to resettlement through the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme and the new children at risk resettlement scheme. The basic principles of Dublin are right and need to be upheld, but the question is how we can improve the practical aspects of it.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): If the Dublin convention is to work optimally, it requires the collection of biometric data from migrants. Perfectly understandably, the more savvy migrant declines to co-operate with that process, probably with the connivance of Italian and Greek officials. What can be done to strengthen that part of the Dublin arrangements?

James Brokenshire: It is about practical implementation, and that is why I made the point about the 75 experts we are sending out to Greece. Other European countries are doing the same, to see that the practical measure of taking fingerprints is upheld at the frontline. I think that practical support will make the difference.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Does the Minister accept that the Dublin regulation should put a floor on what we do, not a ceiling? With that in mind, will he look again at the treatment of those who claim asylum having previously helped our armed forces in Afghanistan as interpreters? If they had treated us as we now treat them, the lives of many of our servicemen would have been put at risk or lost.

James Brokenshire: I will look carefully at what the right hon. Gentleman says about how those who have supported the British armed forces in Afghanistan are analysed and treated in our asylum system. Many right hon. and hon. Members have raised that issue, and I can assure him that I am giving it close attention.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Does the Minister agree that EU reform in this area should take into account a member state’s efforts to resettle refugees from third countries outside the EU and to fund those countries? With the UK having delivered more than £1 billion of aid to try to prevent perilous journeys at sea, it would be right for the EU to endorse our approach if reduced migration is the aim.

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the steps that the Government have taken through the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. Our focus remains on providing safe routes for the most vulnerable in the region. The UK has made an important contribution, which plays a part in the overall work across the EU of providing stability and preventing people from making the journey.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that there is a huge amount of concern about the issue in this country, and especially about unaccompanied children in the camps in Calais. It is welcome to hear that the Government now agree with Alf Dubs, but given what the Minister has said today and the problems that we have seen to date with people claiming asylum through the current Dublin arrangements, will he give us some numbers? How many young people does he think the UK will now be able to offer sanctuary to as a result of the decision that the Government have made today?

James Brokenshire: The Prime Minister said earlier that we will discuss the matter with local authorities, and we will also continue discussions with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Save the Children and others. It is right that we assess the issue carefully in that way and come to the right conclusion.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the UK has the double protection of being outside the automatic opt-in and outside Schengen, so that when asylum seekers choose not to claim asylum at the first port of call, they cannot travel across Europe and come to the UK through a no-border zone?

James Brokenshire: We have the best of both worlds in being outside the borderless area of Schengen, which gives us the protection of being able to uphold our own border and carry out the necessary checks, and having legal rights through the opt-ins and the enhanced mechanisms that the Prime Minister achieved through his renegotiation, which will add to that protection.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It would be helpful if the Minister made it clear, given that the Government are now going to accept the Dubs amendment, that many of the justice and home affairs opt-outs are designed, as he has just said, to control Britain’s borders. He will be aware of the very good journalism by Ben Riley-Smith of The Telegraph showing that the Semaphore system, which controls those coming into the country, went down for several days last summer, leading to the
Minister and the Home Secretary being roused from their beds. Yesterday, his permanent secretary admitted that that had happened many times but would not say when and for how long. Do we not deserve that information? Will the Minister publish it?

James Brokenshire: We provide clear assurance and protections for the UK border. We take a multi-layered approach. We ensure that the primary control points have 100% checks for scheduled arrivals, which the last Labour Government did not do. This Government will continue to maintain that focus on our border and security.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know from the conference on the migrant crisis at which both he and I spoke last week of the anger and despair of the Hungarian Government at what is now being proposed by the European Union. Will he explain what our Government are doing to criticise, or to try to take enforcement action against, Germany for its unilateral rejection of the current regulations?

James Brokenshire: As I have indicated to the House, the Government have opt-outs and opt-ins for certain measures. There are aspects of Schengen that we are not party to, and we will not be party to the Schengen area. It is for those member states bound by those regulations to enforce compliance, with the Commission. That is rightly a matter for them and not for the UK.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I hope that the Minister will find a way to provide more support for unaccompanied children. Compassion demands it. Will he outline how the UK front-line support that is going to be provided to Greece and Italy will help to ensure that unaccompanied children already in the European Union do not go missing?

James Brokenshire: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point about issues such as trafficking and exploitation. Kevin Hyland, the independent anti-slavery commissioner, will be travelling out to Greece and Italy shortly. The experts we are sending out will include people with knowledge and understanding of those issues in relation to children, so as to seek to provide greater assurance on the very matter he raised.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Through their recent renegotiation the Government have demonstrated that an axiom of our EU membership is our common European citizenship, which implies the common treatment of people right across the EU. Will the Minister not concede that if the public vote to remain in the EU, he will not long be able to resist pressure in the Council of Ministers to concede our opt-out and to join the arrangements, whatever those are, in a process of bargaining away to achieve whatever happen to be the objectives of the Government of the day?

James Brokenshire: I do not concede that. The UK has very clear legal protections; indeed the way in which we opted out of a number of pre-existing justice and home affairs measures shows the clear approach of this Government in upholding what is in the UK’s best interests. I have been very explicit this afternoon in highlighting that we judge that being part of the relocation mechanism is not in the interests of the UK.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Given that the Minister has said that the asylum regime may well change after the EU referendum, will he concede that there is no status quo on the ballot paper for the referendum, just as those who voted to stay in the Common Market in 1975 did not get the status quo? Given that Opposition parties seem to be working on the basis that other EU countries are incapable of providing decent and humane refuge to asylum seekers, does he agree that we should not want to be part of a political union that cannot treat asylum seekers properly and with decency?

James Brokenshire: On the status quo, the Commission has said explicitly that we can continue to uphold and operate the existing Dublin arrangements if we decide not to opt in to the new measures published today. That assurance is important. Clearly, we will continue to work to support other EU partners, to ensure that those who claim asylum on their shores are able to do so effectively. Our expert support is precisely in tune with that.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): Part of the plan announced today is a proposal that European countries that refuse to give shelter to refugees could be forced to pay into the coffers of countries that do take them. We have the temporary opt-out on this at present, but will the Minister state that that opt-out is absolutely guaranteed and is one that we will not consider reneging on? Will he also publish the legal advice he has been given on the legal basis for that proposal?

James Brokenshire: I say to my hon. Friend that I am not referring to some temporary opt-out. Our ability to opt-in to measures on justice and home affairs matters is one of the basic principles of the treaty. I know he understands and recognises that. It is the basis upon which I have made my points to the House this afternoon.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Minister has been involved on the issue of human trafficking for many years and so knows about the problem. One problem with continental Europe is its open borders. Whatever the other advantages of those open borders, they are a human trafficker’s charter. It seems to me that the new proposals will add to that problem. We want more checking, to stop the evil crime of trafficking.

James Brokenshire: I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend, who has done so much to highlight the issue and has assisted in the reforms that have taken place. We need to step up our response to organised immigration crime, which is why we have established the taskforce and will continue to work with European partners to highlight these important issues and see that children are protected and do not fall into the hands of traffickers. I hope that the work on the frontline and the further inputs from Kevin Hyland will assist us not just as a country but in supporting other member EU states.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts: Enterprise Act 2016
Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the disclosure, consideration and approval of proposals for onshore electricity power stations of 50MW or less; to require the application of Engineering Construction Industry (NAECI) terms and conditions in certain circumstances; to require sector-specific collective national workforce agreements in other circumstances; and for connected purposes.

Any solid biomass or combined heat and power plant producing 50 MW or below—indeed, any power project producing 50 MW or below—does not come under the terms of national planning consent. Ostensibly that sounds fine, as it supposedly gives more control to local people about developments in their locality. Projects with a generating capacity of 50 MW and less are considered under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and can therefore be dealt with by local authorities.

That is where, for workers in the construction industry, the problems begin. Civil engineering and engineering construction are lifestyle choices that demand commitment, loyalty and hard graft. Workers more often than not work long hours under arduous and sometimes dangerous conditions to produce the end-product. However, all those great virtues count for nothing when the dice are loaded. From Teesside to south Yorkshire, from Scotland to Wales, there has been a recent epidemic of deliberate subterfuge to avoid and evade the industry standard for terms and conditions for construction workers in the power generation sector.

Locally, I and fellow Teesside Labour MPs, such as my hon. Friends the Members for Redcar (Anna Turley), for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), have been trying to unravel a complex knot of potential exploitation and undercutting. We have been working alongside the GMB and Unite the union at both regional and national level.

The sleight of hand employed and the deliberate use of opaque contractual arrangements via umbrella companies, which has seen workers paying their own national insurance twice, are known universally. Put together with potential undercutting and exploitation of migrant workers, they only frustrate an area and its people, who have seen massive privation in the light of closures at SSI Steel, Caparo Hartlepool, Air Products and Boulby potash mine, to mention just a few of the sites undergoing closure or job losses. That frustration has culminated in a year-long escalation of unrest in the construction industry fraternity, with mass protests outside the Wilton International site about the fact that the Wilton 11 energy from waste plant is being built on Teesside with a predominantly non-UK labour force.

Any MP considering the upcoming construction of energy from waste, biomass, or combined heat and power plant, must be aware that any individual project in or near their constituency that is under 50 MW will have achieved planning consent from a local authority. That consent will almost certainly not carry the necessary
requirements of collective agreements, such as NAECI terms and conditions for workers in the construction of the project, which would also instil a level playing field for all at the tendering stages of the project.

Until now, the assumption has been that NAECI terms would carry over, but sadly that has not been the case. Owing to unscrupulous practices by certain construction companies, the lack of a voice in this growing market of power generation has led many who have been shut out of employment to take on board tactics that are born out of pure frustration and can develop into demonstrable anger. On 1 March and 7 April 2015, large numbers of construction workers took part in co-ordinated protests outside new biomass power stations in Rotherham, south Yorkshire, Port Talbot and Dunbar, and with the support of GMB, Unite and UCATT trade union members, they blockaded and disrupted work on those sites.

As a comparator for the injustice and undercutting of those unscrupulous construction companies, the rate under the national industry agreement should be between £16 and £64 an hour, depending on the skill of the role. However, the largely migrant workforce on those projects is being paid just £9 to £13 an hour—approximately between £7 and £10. With current levels of unemployment above the national average in the industry, it is no wonder that those workers are angry at the exploitation of migrant labour at the expense of local employment.

How can developers and employers get away with this race to the bottom? In Rotherham, for example, the local council gave planning consent in 2011, but sites producing under 50 MW have no legal provision for adherence to collective agreements. The venture capitalists Brite Partnerships bought the site and then sold it on at a big profit to a Danish company, Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners. CI then contracted Babcock & Wilcox Volund and Interserve to design, construct and operate the plant. In talks at its Birmingham office with GMB and Unite, BWV refused to allow the project to be included under the terms of the “blue book” NAECI national agreement. Subsequently, BWV sub-contracted the construction of the boiler to a Croatian firm called Đuro Đakovic TEP, which tendered to a lowest bid based on Croatian economic wage levels.

Đuro Đakovic TEP has form—very bad form. It is the same company that GMB and Unite caught underpaying its largely migrant workforce last year on the Ferrybridge Multifuels power station in Yorkshire. Because that job came under the NAECI independent audit facility, the unions were able to force the company to repay every euro that it owed its workers. However—sadly—the unions discovered only later from a worker via email, that when those workers got back to Croatia, the money was retaken from their wages under duress. Because the Rotherham biomass project and similar new waste-to-energy plants are not covered by collective agreements, and because they are under 50 MW, the employer can pay below the rate, and legally get away with it.

Well-meaning legislation from the European Union to try to combat such malpractice does not go far enough. Currently, it only gives workers who have been posted to work temporarily in another EU country the protection of the host country’s minimum standards, namely the minimum wage, not the industry rate such as NAECI. That is not the EU’s fault; it is our fault for not protecting the pay, terms and conditions of all workers at the trade union NAECI national agreed rate.

Without blanket collective bargaining for all workers, firms will use caveats to exploit them. Support of collective bargaining and of collectively bargained nationally achieved terms is the only solution to prevent the exploitation of immigrant labour, and a real tangible means by which we as a nation can prevent the deliberate social discord that is created among our own communities by effectively excluding workers in our towns from seeking and achieving meaningful employment.

We can achieve such collective bargaining, and also help local authorities that are under severe financial and logistical pressure, by ensuring at the start of the planning process—whether a power generation site is above or below 50 MW—that collective agreements such as NAECI “blue book” terms, and nationally agreed minimum terms, are adhered to by any company that is constructing on British soil. That must be clearly written within the contract.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Tom Blenkinsop, Kevin Barron, Sarah Champion, John Healey, Andy McDonald, Anna Turley, Alex Cunningham and Mr Iain Wright present the Bill.

Tom Blenkinsop accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First to be; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 May, and to be printed (Bill 173).

Mr Speaker: I have received no indication that the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change has any plans to make a statement to the House on that extremely important matter. The hon. Gentleman may be dissatisfied by that news. If he is, he has manifold ways in which to pursue the matter through the use of the Order Paper and the facility of this Chamber. Knowing his experience and dexterity, I feel sure that he will use all the instruments available to him.
Opposition Day

[UN-ALLOTTED HALF DAY]

NHS Bursaries

Relevant document: e-petition, entitled Keep the NHS Bursary (113491).

1.26 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House recognises the contribution of student nurses, midwives, allied health professionals and other healthcare staff; has serious concerns about the potential impact of removing NHS bursaries on the recruitment and retention of staff; and calls on the Government to drop their plans to remove NHS bursaries and instead to consult on how they can best fund and support the future healthcare workforce.

I have been told that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer), will be opening this debate for the Government. Given that the Health Secretary is sitting next to him, may I ask the Minister why we will not be hearing from his boss today? If he would like to give a genuine reason I would be happy to take an intervention, but if not I will take it that the Health Secretary simply does not want to defend his policy to the House.

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a certain amount of chirruping from the Treasury Bench and elsewhere on this matter, and I simply make two points. It is entirely for the Government to decide which Minister to field, but I say gently to the Secretary of State, and to the Deputy Leader of the House, that to sit on the Bench rather than to participate while these matters are debated, is one thing—particularly in the case of the Secretary of State—but to sit there fiddling ostentatiously with an electronic device defies the established convention of State and to the House. It is a point so blindingly obvious that only an extraordinarily clever and sophisticated person could fail to grasp it.

Heidi Alexander: Thank you, Mr Speaker. This is not the first time that the Health Secretary has chosen not to respond to debates that I have secured or questions that I have put.

Mr Speaker: Order! I am not inviting a response from the hon. Lady. [Interruption.] Order! I am simply telling her that it is discourteous to behave like that—a point that most people would readily understand.

Heidi Alexander: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will leave my comments on that matter there.

In the past few months, Ministers and I have had a number of exchanges across the Dispatch Box about the unnecessary and dangerous fight the Government are picking with junior doctors. You might think that having totally alienated one section of the NHS workforce, Ministers would think twice about doing it again, but you would be wrong. Not content with junior doctors, the Government are now targeting the next generation of nurses, midwives and other allied health professionals: podiatrists, physiotherapists, radiographers and many more. Instead of investing in healthcare students, and instead of valuing them and protecting their bursaries, which help with living costs and cover all their tuition fees, the Government are asking them to pay for the privilege of training to work in the NHS: scrap the bursary, ask tomorrow’s NHS workforce to rack up enormous debts, and claim that this is the answer to current staff shortages.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a spending commitment. Why then, only a few months ago, did she stand on a manifesto that opposed the Government’s £10 billion investment in the NHS?

Heidi Alexander: The Labour party has always made it clear that it would have given the NHS every penny it needs.

Given the approach to healthcare students I have outlined, most people would think the Government had taken leave of their senses. They would be right.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): My constituents in Hull are baffled by the Government’s approach. At a time when our local hospitals have to recruit nurses from Spain and other European countries, stopping bursaries that enable more people to get training seems absolutely ridiculous.

Heidi Alexander: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, the bursary acts as an incentive to get those students into training and into the NHS.

A few weeks ago, the Government launched their consultation on the technical detail of the changes—not the principle, just the detail. In his foreword, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Ipswich, claimed that the proposals were “good for students, good for patients and good for the NHS.” The opposite is the case.

Before I set out why the plans are so bad, it is important to remind ourselves of why our country has a nursing shortage in the first place. Shortly after the 2010 election, the coalition Government cut the number of nurse training commissions in an attempt to make short-term savings. The cuts saw nurse training places reduced from more than 20,000 a year to just 17,000, the lowest level since the 1990s. As a result, we trained 8,000 fewer nurses in the previous Parliament than we would have done had we maintained commissions at 2010 levels. At the time, experts such as the Royal College of Nursing warned that the cuts would cause “serious issues in undersupply for years to come.”

It was right, but it was ignored by Ministers who were too focused on the short term and no doubt too distracted by their plans to launch a massive reorganisation of the NHS.

Our health service is now suffering the consequences of those decisions. New analysis by the House of Commons Library released today shows that the number of nurses per head of population fell from 6,786 per million
people in 2009 to 6,645 per million people in 2015. A Unison survey published just last week found that more than two-thirds of respondents felt that staffing levels had got worse in the past year, with a further 63% saying they felt there were inadequate numbers of staff on the wards to ensure safe, dignified and compassionate care. Because of these shortages, hospitals are forced to recruit from overseas or spend vast amounts on expensive agency staff.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): In the years 2014 to 2015, the NHS spent £3.3 billion on agency staff. Does the short-sighted step of removing the bursary mean that beleaguered trusts may actually be more reliant on agency staff?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is completely right to point out that the problem of staff shortages leads to more agency staff having to be used, and that creates an enormous black hole in hospital finances. My fear is that the proposals will put off the next generation of nurses.

It now appears that the Government are making some of the same mistakes all over again. A report sneaked out on the day the House rose for the Easter recess revealed that the Government had commissioned only one-tenth of the extra nurse training places that experts said were needed this year. The report, from the Migration Advisory Committee, states:

"We were told that HEE—Health Education England—"has acknowledged that, on the basis of workforce modelling alone, they would have liked to commission an additional 3,000 places in 2016-2017. Funding constraints meant that they had only commissioned an additional 331 places; one tenth of what was actually needed."

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Does the hon. Lady not agree that by changing the way we run the NHS, especially in relation to bursaries and opening it up to more competition, we will get more nurses coming into the NHS, thus plugging the gap she describes?

Heidi Alexander: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman, and later in my speech I shall explain why in some detail.

I would like to return to the Migration Advisory Committee report, because it does not make happy reading for Ministers. It goes on to say:

"It seems self-evident to us that the reduction in the number of commissioned training places between 2010 and 2013 across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, was a significant contributing factor towards the current national shortage of nurses."

Finally, there is the crucial sentence that sums up why we are experiencing across-the-board nursing shortages:

"Almost all of these issues relate to, and are caused by, a desire to save money. But this is a choice, not a fixed fact. The Government could invest more resource if it wanted to."

Those are the words of the Migration Advisory Committee. Hospitals are short of nurses; mental health services are short of nurses—so, too, are care homes, hospices and primary care. We therefore have a big problem. No one in this House disputes that, but no one in this House should be under any illusion as to the cause. The question, when faced with this problem, is this: what is the right thing to do? How best can the Government work with experts to ensure that we are training enough staff and supporting those staff so that they stay motivated and stay working in the NHS?

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Of course we all agree that there is a significant shortage of nurses, and the hon. Lady is absolutely right to ask what should be done. Does she therefore support the Government’s concept of associate nurses, which I believe will make a huge difference in places like my constituency where we need new nurses of this kind to increase the numbers of home-trained nursing staff?

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The key question we need answered with regard to nursing associates is whether the Government intend them to replace registered nurses. If that is the case, I fear the proposals would be bad for patient care.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you might think a sensible approach to trying to resolve this problem would be to sit down with the Royal College of Nursing, other trade unions, universities and healthcare providers to work out a way forward. But no, this Government seem incapable of that. Instead, in just two lines in the Chancellor’s autumn statement, they announced that they would be scrapping NHS bursaries and asking student nurses to pay tuition fees. The Minister will argue that this will allow universities to train more students, but his problem is this.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should listen to the Royal College, which said that these proposals were “high risk”, potentially “detering prospective students from entering the nursing profession”, and that they risked “worsening the nursing shortage”?

Heidi Alexander: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I think the Government’s problem is this: they have failed to back up their claim with any evidence and they are now faced with a breadth of opposition to this proposal, not just from Members but from the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of Midwives and Unison, while organisations such as MillionPlus, the association for modern universities, are also questioning the assumptions on which the Government base this policy.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree with my constituent Zoe, who is training to be a nurse and is particularly concerned about mature students? She feels that about 50% of their time is spent in unpaid clinical placements in hospitals in the community, so they do not have the opportunity to do part-time work to support themselves as many others do. Will they not be disproportionately affected?

Heidi Alexander: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I shall make some remarks on that precise point later.

The Opposition’s purpose in calling today’s debate is that we hope the House can rally round what many would view as a straightforward and reasonable proposal—
that the Government drop these plans and instead consult on how properly to fund and support the future healthcare workforce.

Let me set out why these plans are bad for students, bad for patients and bad for the NHS. The Government claim that these plans will leave healthcare students 25% better off. What they will not say is that, according to their own consultation, in order to be 25% better off, a student will have to take out a maximum maintenance and tuition fee loan for three years and would graduate with debts of between £48,000 and £59,000.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Many Members will know that I had a son born at 23 weeks’ gestation who spent six months in intensive care with a neonatal nurse, Nicola Probert, who sadly died not long after my son came out of hospital. I am frightened, as many people watching this debate will be, that people like Nicola will no longer go into the profession because of the astronomical debts that they will have to take on. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a regressive step, and that the Government should think again about it?

Heidi Alexander: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. It seems that the Government’s argument is that students will be better off because they can borrow more. The simple truth is that loan repayments will hit nurses’ take-home pay—there are no two ways about it.

The current starting salary for a nurse is £21,692—just above the student loan repayment threshold which, of course, has been frozen. This means that nurses will start paying off their loans as soon as they graduate. According to Unison, based on current salary levels nurses will be faced with an average pay cut of over £900 a year to meet their debt repayments. How can that possibly be justified? Even worse, the average age of a student nurse is 28, so the current 30-year repayment period means that many nurses will be paying off loans to within years of retirement. We Labour Members say it is wrong to burden the next generation of NHS staff with a lifetime of debt and wrong to expect tomorrow’s nurses to pay the price for this Government’s mismanagement of the NHS.

Does the Minister not understand that student nurses, midwives and other allied health professionals are different from other students? Can he not see that it is dangerous to assume that just because application rates remain stable after the trebling of tuition fees in the last Parliament, the same will happen with his proposals? Assuming healthcare students will respond in the same way as other students to a tuition fees hike is one hell of an assumption and one hell of a risk.

Courses for nursing, midwifery and other allied health professions are substantially different from most other arts and science degrees. Courses are more onerous—there are fewer holidays, longer days and longer term times—while students are also required to spend about half their time in clinical practice. This means 2,300 hours in the case of a student nurse, including night and weekend shifts as a normal part of their studies.

David Morris: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Heidi Alexander: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman, and I want to make some progress.

These changes will effectively charge students for working in the NHS. Of course, longer term times and clinical placements also make it harder for these students to get a part-time job to supplement their income in the way many other students do. It is not just the course that makes healthcare students unique; they are much more likely to be women, much more likely to be mature students, much more likely to have children and more likely to be from BME backgrounds.

Many nursing students have already completed one degree and turn to nursing in their late 20s or early 30s—indeed, the average age of a student nurse is 28. When I think of my own friends who are nurses and midwives, I find that three out of four took the decision to re-train, having done a different first degree.

The Minister probably moves in different circles from me, but I can tell him that if he wants a dose of reality, my friends would, I am sure, be more than happy to oblige. I understand that he may not have experienced the conversations that I had in my working-class family about the pluses and minuses of racking up debts to get a degree, but I can tell him that for many nurses, under his proposals, that consideration will be all too real.

Does he not realise that for the one in five healthcare students with children, the fear of debt is greater than it is for carefree, privately educated history students bound for Cambridge? My concern about these proposals is that we ultimately end up with those best placed to pay becoming nurses and midwives rather than those best placed to care. That brings me on to why these proposals are bad for patients.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I think we are all agreed on the need for more nurses; the question is how we fund them. Will the hon. Lady tell us how much money she would take away from front-line NHS care in order to fund the expansion of nursing places that the country needs?

Heidi Alexander: We set out at the last election our clearly costed plans for how to recruit additional nurses, doctors and care staff to the NHS.

The NHS should have a workforce that reflects the population it serves—just as this place should, too. The mental health sector in particular relies on mature students and the additional life experience they bring to what is a very demanding environment.

A few months ago, I met Marina, a young woman who has not had an easy life, but who is now on a mission to become a mental health nurse. When Marina says that she thinks some of the people best placed to care for others are those who have experienced hardships themselves, I think she has a point; and when she says she would not have been able to start her training without the bursary, I believe her. Why is the Minister so convinced that the NHS can do without people like Marina in the future? Why does he think they should pay to train, and why will he not consider other options for increasing student numbers?

The quality of training that student nurses, midwives and other allied health professionals receive will also depend on the quality of their clinical placements. Government Ministers claim these changes could deliver
up to 10,000 extra places over the course of this Parliament, so can they set out what capacity hospitals and other providers have to accommodate these extra students, and confirm whether Health Education England has sufficient funds set aside to fund these placements? Will the Minister be clear about how this 10,000 figure was arrived at? Is it the Government’s assessment of what the system needs, what Health Education England can afford to fund or simply a big-sounding number plucked out of the air at random?

An extra 10,000 compared with when? What is the baseline year on which we should judge the Minister’s policy? I have asked him that three times in written parliamentary questions, and each time I have not received an answer. Does he not understand that if his Department cannot even answer a simple question relating to one of its key claims about the policy, that does not exactly inspire confidence? There are so many questions that the Minister needs to answer that it is impossible to do all of them justice in a single speech.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): As has been indicated, it is agreed that we need to expand the number of places. Thanks to this Government, however, an extra £10 billion has been put into GP services, acute services, cancer treatment and hospital care. Which of those services would the hon. Lady cut to fund the alternative?

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Gentleman does not seem to realise that that money is plugging a very big black hole in NHS finances. I am sure that when the Minister responds to my speech, he will note that many people who apply to study for nursing and other healthcare degrees are turned away, but what proportion of those unsuccessful applicants actually meet the entry criteria? How can he be sure that his new system will deliver the required numbers of different types of nurses and other healthcare professionals in the right geographical areas? What guarantees has he given to higher education institutions that the new arrangements will fully cover the costs of delivering degrees, and what assessment has he made of the amount of un-repaid student debt that will accumulate, given that, over a lifetime, some nurses will not earn enough to repay the totality of their loans plus interest?

The proposal to scrap NHS bursaries is a massive gamble at a time when the NHS needs certainty. Put simply, it will shift the costs of training nurses, midwives and other allied health professionals from the state to the individual. If we are all happy to enjoy the benefits of the NHS, why should we not all contribute to the training of those who work in it?

I was the first member of my family to go to university. My tuition fees were paid in full, and I received a full maintenance grant. What really worries me is that people like me, and people like my friends, will be put off what could be a fulfilling and important career. We should be doing all we can to inspire today’s schoolchildren to become the nurses and healthcare professionals of the future, but, sadly, the Government are making a very good job of doing the very opposite. If Ministers want to continue to import staff from overseas, they are going the right way about it. We owe a debt of gratitude to those staff, but we want home-grown staff too.

Finally, let me return to the Government’s consultation paper. One section is entitled “Nursing, midwifery and allied health professional students deserve the same opportunities as other students.” Labour Members say, “No, they deserve better.” Those people should be treated differently from other students, because they are the people who will look after us when we are older, care for our relatives when they are sick and staff the NHS when this shambolic Government are long gone.

The Government should drop these proposals and think again. I commend the motion to the House.

1.54 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): It is a great pleasure to respond to the motion, not least because I think that this is potentially one of the most exciting things that we will do in the NHS in the next five years to increase opportunity and quality, and the presence of nursing staff on wards. We will be able to do that because of the reform that has helped so many other students throughout the country in the last five years.

The hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) entered the House at the same time as I did. In November 2010, we sat on opposite sides of the House and contributed to a debate; many of us expressed anxiety about the outcome, not least because of the enormous pressures that we were experiencing from our constituents. Members who have been here for many years will know that that was the first occasion on which a riot taking place outside the House could be heard from the Chamber. The rioters were complaining that we were going to destroy people’s ability to go to university. We were going to make it impossible for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to go there, and we were going to set back years of progress in the closing of the inequality gap in this country.

Members on both sides of the House who spoke in that debate felt very passionately about the issue. We believed that it could be resolved by different means, but over the last five years we have been able to see the effect—and, as posited by the hon. Member for Lewisham East, the evidence—of the changes that were made. That evidence is quite clear. This year, 394,380 people were given university places in this country, 35,000 more than were given places in 2010, the year of the debate. If those 35,000 were to make up a single university, it would be the fourth largest in the country: one university, the fourth largest in one year, following the expansion of opportunity that resulted from the reforms that the House passed in 2010.

The hon. Lady made the most important point, however, when she asked how the reforms extended opportunity to the people who most needed to go to university. I regret the tone that she adopted in that portion of her speech; it was, I am afraid, beneath her. It was indeed wrong that when I was at university my fees were paid for in part by nurses paying tax on low wages. That was wrong, and we accepted that it was wrong. We also accepted that the system was not helping the people who most needed to go to university in order to escape their backgrounds.

The result that we should be looking for now is the number of people from disadvantaged backgrounds who have been helped to get into university in the last
either inspire people to aspire and give them the opportunity to demonstrate the Minister's point? We have a choice: we now than in 2010; and there are specific recommendations wrong on both points: more mature students are applying in the consultation to deal with mature students.

I know that the hon. Lady’s motivations back then were entirely honest and commendable. I also know that many Conservative Members felt likewise. But we have to accept when we get things wrong, and it is in that regard, I am afraid, that the hon. Lady, rather than us, is failing to learn from history. During the 2010 debate, in an intervention on one of my hon. Friends, she said that the proposed changes would force on students a “huge debt”, and that “the huge debt that they could now face will act as a greater disincentive to go to university than it will for students from more affluent backgrounds”.[Official Report, 9 December 2010; Vol. 520, c. 379].

The hon. Lady has made exactly the same point in today’s debate. She was wrong then, and I humbly suggest that she is wrong on this occasion. She should listen very carefully to the evidence that has been presented, not by me but by so many institutions, about the progress that has been made in reducing inequalities, and the reasons why we need to press ahead. In this instance, for one reason alone—and I will come to them in a second—but implied in the hon. Member for Lewisham East. It implicitly accepts that many Conservative Members felt likewise. But we have to accept when we get things wrong, and it is in that regard, I am afraid, that the hon. Lady, rather than us, is failing to learn from history. During the 2010 debate, in an intervention on one of my hon. Friends, she said that the proposed changes would force on students a “huge debt”, and that “the huge debt that they could now face will act as a greater disincentive to go to university than it will for students from more affluent backgrounds”.[Official Report, 9 December 2010; Vol. 520, c. 379].

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Heidi Alexander: Does the Minister not accept, though, that healthcare students have very different characteristics from other students, and that their behaviour will not necessarily be same as that of students affected by the reforms in the last Parliament?

Ben Gummer: I accept that there are differences—I will come to them in a second—but implied in the hon. Lady’s point is an acceptance that she was wrong in 2010, and she should therefore be more measured in her proposals, or lack of them.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It has not all been plain sailing since the reforms, not least as regards the impact on applications from mature students, who make up a significant proportion of the nursing cohort. Does the Minister not accept that there is no proposal in the consultation on how to mitigate the risk to good recruits from mature student backgrounds, who make up a significant proportion of the nursing workforce?

Ben Gummer: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is wrong on both points: more mature students are applying now than in 2010; and there are specific recommendations in the consultation to deal with mature students.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): Does this not demonstrate the Minister’s point? We have a choice: we either inspire people to aspire and give them the opportunity to enter the NHS by talking it up, or we take the opposite view, talk the NHS down by being negative, and put people off.

Ben Gummer: I do believe that. The Opposition were wrong back in 2010, and had we followed their advice, fewer people from disadvantaged backgrounds—precisely the people Labour was elected to represent and support—would be going to university. As a result of our taking forward brave proposals, in the teeth of much opposition, we have done more for the prospects of people from disadvantaged backgrounds than any Government dealing with this matter since higher education was reformed after the second world war.

I come now, I am afraid, to the motion tabled by the hon. Member for Lewisham East. It implicitly accepts that we have made progress. The fact that it is so anaemic in offering an alternative makes it clear that there is no alternative suggestion that she thinks would achieve the aims that she and I want: an increase in the number of students going into nursing and training, and of those coming from a diverse background. It also implies that she accepts, like me, that workforce planning over the last 10, 15, 20, 30 or 40 years has failed. I can say that, whereas she is not willing to, because everything we are doing now to correct workforce numbers—for example, the 5,000 additional GPs my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary fought the last election campaign on and will be delivering in the next few years—is the result of poor commissioning decisions made not under the coalition Government, or even in the latter years of the Labour Government, but under Governments 20 and 30 years ago.

The failure to predict the number of GPs needed, and the number and types of other professionals needed, lands us perpetually in this perverse situation where we are not accepting British students on to training courses at British universities and, as a result, are not creating the numbers of domestically trained nurses we need. In response to the inadequacies in care uncovered as a result of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust scandal and the failure of the Labour Government to provide the number of nurses needed in hospitals across the country, we are having to import nurses from abroad and to fill nurse places with expensive agency posts. That is something we are putting right now.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): One of the main pieces of feedback I have had from Salisbury NHS Foundation Trust is its frustration at the reliance on agency nurses, so I welcome the Government’s moves, because they will open up supply and reduce that reliance and the significant additional costs we have seen over the last few years.

Ben Gummer: It is precisely to help my hon. Friend’s hospital that we are introducing these reforms.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Minister said there was no alternative to these proposals. Which of the royal colleges did he consult with this matter since higher education was reformed after the second world war.

Ben Gummer: I do believe that. The Opposition were wrong back in 2010, and had we followed their advice, fewer people from disadvantaged backgrounds—precisely the people Labour was elected to represent and support—would be going to university. As a result of our taking forward brave proposals, in the teeth of much opposition, we have done more for the prospects of people from disadvantaged backgrounds than any Government dealing with this matter since higher education was reformed after the second world war.

I come now, I am afraid, to the motion tabled by the hon. Member for Lewisham East. It implicitly accepts that we have made progress. The fact that it is so anaemic in offering an alternative makes it clear that there is no alternative suggestion that she thinks would achieve the aims that she and I want: an increase in the number of students going into nursing and training, and of those coming from a diverse background. It also implies that she accepts, like me, that workforce planning over the last 10, 15, 20, 30 or 40 years has failed. I can say that, whereas she is not willing to, because everything we are doing now to correct workforce numbers—for example, the 5,000 additional GPs my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary fought the last election campaign on and will be delivering in the next few years—is the result of poor commissioning decisions made not under the coalition Government, or even in the latter years of the Labour Government, but under Governments 20 and 30 years ago.

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Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Minister said there was no alternative to these proposals. Which of the royal colleges did he consult with this matter since higher education was reformed after the second world war.
and with Unison. As I would expect, we differ on key parts—though not every part—of the plan, but the royal college’s initial response accepted that the premise on which we were proceeding was, in significant part, correct. In the consultation, I want to find areas we can agree on and improve the proposals we have put before the public. We were open about the consultation and offered the full 12 weeks—many people said we would not do so, but we did—precisely so that we could listen to the concerns, proposals and exciting challenges from people across the sectors, and thereby improve the proposals we have put before the NHS.

The motion suggests a series of things, but not a proposal from the Opposition to do anything different. They are not offering the NHS any new money—they offered £4.5 billion less than we did at the last election—so I can only presume that the money would have to be found from cuts elsewhere in the service. The hon. Lady will have no credibility unless she tells the House that she will pay for the 10,000 additional training places out of taxpayers’ money, rather than by finding an alternative funding mechanism. I will not offer the House a series of suggestions that might or might not be better, or merely criticise proposals, rather than offering constructive improvements.

**Heidi Alexander:** Whenever I make suggestions, they’re just ignored.

**Ben Gummer:** The hon. Lady is welcome to contribute to the consultation. She is doing so now, although sadly we heard no solutions or alternative proposals. I intend to set out not suggestions, but a clear announcement of our plans, the reasons for them, and how we will enact them over the year to come.

**Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab):** The Opposition have proffered many solutions to the Government. Just last week, we suggested a cross-party solution to the doctors crisis, but it was thrown back in our Front-Bench team’s face. Here is another solution: will the Minister speak to colleagues in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to see whether the apprenticeship levy, which the Government are taking from all large employers, could be spent on subsidising nurses to tackle the funding challenges?

**Ben Gummer:** The hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), who has concerns about the proposals, has discussed the matter with me several times and offered some useful suggestions about the detail. I have accepted his points and incorporated them into our thinking. I am very willing to listen to people from across the House when they come with helpful suggestions, and I am sure that the Minister for Skills, my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), would be interested in the hon. Gentleman’s contribution about the apprenticeship levy. The way not to do it, however, is to come to the House with a series of criticisms but not one suggestion, nor any money to provide for the increased number of training places in the plan.

We should make these changes not only for reasons of social equity, though that is the foremost reason; not only to produce 10,000 additional training places in our university system; and not only because we have a broken planning system, which otherwise would remain broken—even people as intelligent as the hon. Member for Lewisham East cannot predict how many nurses, doctors and allied health professionals we will need in 20 or 30 years, or the skills they will need. Even were it not for all those things, it would still be important to do this, because of the changes it will make to the quality of training we can provide to nursing graduates. Across the rest of undergraduate training, universities have been released to innovate and improve their courses. Satisfaction levels have gone up and drop-out rates have fallen; consequently, people are getting a better experience.

We have not, however, been able to spread those advantages to nurses, who, I am afraid, remain trapped in a system that is prescriptive and does not take account of the skills that they and their future employers will need. By releasing universities from their straitjacket, we can make significant improvements to the quality of the training they provide.

**Heidi Alexander:** That’s just an assertion.

**Ben Gummer:** It is an assertion that is backed up by the evidence of the past five years, and which has received the recommendation of Professor Dame Jessica Corner, the chancellor of the Council of Deans of Health. I can tell the hon. Member for Lewisham East, in answer to her barracking, that Professor Dame Jessica Corner said:

“We recognise that this has been a difficult decision for the government but are pleased that the government has found a way forward. Carefully implemented, this should allow universities in partnership with the NHS to increase the number of training places and also improve day to day financial support for students while they are studying. The plan means that students will have access to more day to day maintenance support through the loans system and recognises that these disciplines are higher cost, science-based subjects.”

Likewise, Universities UK has said:

“We support increasing health professional student numbers and will work with Government and the NHS to secure the sustainable funding system”

that the Government have provided. It is particularly pleased about the impact that this will have on placement training. These are the people who are providing training in our NHS, and they support our proposals because they will release the same kind of innovation that we have seen elsewhere in the university sector.

**Richard Graham:** I want to reinforce a point that the Minister has made. I think—he will know this—the evidence shows that far more people from deprived backgrounds have gone to university since the changes we made five years ago, at a time when Opposition Members were saying that they would have precisely the opposite effect. So the evidence is even more conclusive than my hon. Friend suggests. Can he confirm that the maintenance grants will go up by about 25%, which will help in regard to the specific point being made by Universities UK and the other lady?

**Ben Gummer:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. It brings me neatly on to my next point, which is that the great virtue of these reforms to student finance is that we will be able to increase student finance support—maintenance support—by 25%.
The hon. Member for Lewisham East made some clear and sensible points. She suggested that training as a student nurse was different from being a history undergraduate, because student nurses have less time to take on a second job. There is therefore even more reason to provide better maintenance support for them. However, she has not come to tell the House that she will provide 25% additional maintenance support for students who do not have time to do a second job. She has not made that commitment, yet she has criticised our efforts to increase maintenance support by 25% precisely to help those people who would not otherwise be able to take time out to take on a university course. She cannot have it both ways. She cannot criticise us for the reforms we are undertaking while at the same time saying that students need greater support. It is precisely through these reforms that we are producing the support that so many students require.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The Minister talks about maintenance support, but can he clarify that that support will no longer be in the form of a grant, and will now be in the form of a loan? Does he acknowledge that that will land students in even more debt when they finally qualify?

Ben Gummer: By reforming the system so that this becomes a loan rather than a grant, we are able to produce 25% extra support for these students while they are training, much as with the rest of the student population.

The results relating to newly qualified nurses are not as the hon. Member for Lewisham East suggests. She should be very clear in the way she addresses this question, because all of us, whatever our views on this subject, have a duty to inform the public properly. It would be remiss of all of us, even those who disagree with the policy as she does, to mislead potential students into thinking that they will have to pay more than they would otherwise. She said that students would have to pay hundreds of pounds more in repayments once they had qualified. That is just not the case. We anticipate that a newly qualified nurse will pay roughly £90 a year more; that will be about the same as they are currently paying, because of the way in which student payment finance is gradated. The impact on newly qualified nurses will therefore not be anywhere near the impact that she has suggested. She should be very careful about how she addresses her points; otherwise, people could receive an impression about these loans that is not actually a fact.

Nic Dakin: What calculation has the Minister made of how much of the loan will not be paid back over a period of time? Can we have that information in the public domain as well?

Ben Gummer: The economic impact assessment is part of the consultation, and the hon. Gentleman should consult that. It will obviously depend on the way in which the student workforce develops over the next 20 or 30 years, but this has been fully costed within the Treasury’s assumptions, and we anticipate that people working beneath the current limits will not be paying back more than they are doing at the moment. That is in the nature of the way in which student finance repayments are calculated. These measures will not land newly qualified nurses with new payments that they might otherwise not have expected.

Heidi Alexander: The Minister has urged me to be careful with my words, which I was, and I recognise that he is being careful with his, too. He is talking about newly qualified nurses. Can he confirm what the average repayment would be for the average nurse?

Ben Gummer: We do not currently have a figure for the average nurse, as the hon. Lady puts it. I cannot project where a nurse’s career path will take them 50 years into the future, for precisely the reasons that we have been discussing. The actual repayments—I will come to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) in a second. The actual repayments are clearly listed in the consultation document. They are clear about the amount that will be paid back over and above what existing students would be expected to pay.

The only way in which we will be able to square the circle that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North mentioned is by reforming student finance. Rather than shouting from a sedentary position, she might like to know that, contrary to her suggestion that many people in her constituency were none the wiser about this reform, I talked about the reforms to nurses in her constituency a few months ago. I also talked to them about the introduction of apprenticeships and of nursing associate grades, all of which are part of the reforms that I am outlining, and they were very excited about the changes that we are making to the nursing profession. All of this is possible only within a budget that is being carefully controlled, and in which priorities are placed on where the money is spent.

Diana Johnson: I am sorry; perhaps I should not have been shouting at the Minister from a sedentary position, but I am surprised that he has come to this House and been unable to answer a basic question about the amount of money that will be lost through the scheme that he wants to introduce. Surely he ought to have those facts at his fingertips when he is standing at the Dispatch Box.

Ben Gummer: I do have those facts at my fingertips. A newly qualified nurse will not be paying any more than he or she is paying under the current system. For those on higher pay rates, the figures are in the consultation document, and if the hon. Lady is not willing to go and look at that herself, I will write to her with the details for her ease and comfort. Opposition Members, rather than picking at points because they refuse to face the fact that they have to fund their commitments with additional money, should listen carefully to the entirety of the reforms that we are proposing.

Diana Johnson rose—

Ben Gummer: I will make some progress now, if the hon. Lady does not mind.

We are introducing a new nursing associate grade. This will present an extraordinary opportunity to eradicate one of the great unfairnesses in the NHS, which is that there are brilliant people working as healthcare assistants who are unable to become
registered nurses because they were let down by the schools they went to. I am afraid that this is a consequence of the failure of school reform under the previous Government. Under previous Governments, people were failed to the extent that they have not been given the opportunities that they deserve.

We are going to reverse that situation by providing an apprenticeship ladder to a nursing associate role, and from there to a registered nursing position. A degree apprenticeship will be available to those who are able and competent to reach that grade. That will provide a route of opportunity that was not available under the previous Labour Government. It is being brought in by this Conservative Government—a one nation party for all.

By bringing in these reforms, creating a nursing associate role and creating 100,000 apprentices in the NHS, many of whom will be healthcare assistants working their way towards a nursing associate position and from there to a registered nursing grade, we will give people multiple opportunities to become nurses. That will include those who are already in the service and who want to earn while they are learning. It will take them between four and a half and six years to get to a registered nursing position from a healthcare assistant role. It will also include those who are able to take time out and do a degree to become a registered nurse, for whom we will provide additional support in the form of increased maintenance grants. Opposition Members are shaking their heads, but at what, I do not know. Are they shaking their heads at the 100,000 NHS apprentices that we are creating? Are they shaking their heads at the nursing associate roles? Are they shaking their heads at the increased maintenance support? None of those issues was addressed in the speech of the hon. Member for Lewisham East.

Richard Graham: Will the Minister give way?

Ben Gummer: I hope that my hon. Friend will not mind if I just conclude my remarks, because I know that Members from across the House want to contribute to the debate.

In my remaining minutes, I want to state why the reform is important not only for the individuals who want to become nurses, and not just for social equality and opportunity, but for the NHS. The NHS is unable to innovate like other parts of our public sector and our private sector because of the long lead times for training people. We do not have the instruments within the NHS to reflect the dramatic changes in demography and technology that change the NHS not year by year, but month by month. The great benefit of bringing in apprenticeship routes and nursing associate roles, of diversifying the skill mix and of creating quicker, more numerous routes into the nursing profession is that we can create a more diverse, flexible and agile trained workforce.

All that will be possible as a result of the changes, of which this bursary reform is part. None of it would have been possible with the reduction in funding promised by the Labour party, or a failure to wish reform upon the system. That is why I hope that the House will reject the motion, which is full of suggestions and implications rather than firm plans. It says nothing about the future of the people on whom the NHS depends, and does nothing to suggest how we will increase numbers, provide additional maintenance support or, most importantly, provide opportunities for those who have not yet had any. We will do that by reforming the system, just as we did in 2010. We will ensure that we do not listen to the well-intentioned but erroneous voices of the Labour party. Had we listened to them back in 2010, tens of thousands of people would have been denied an opportunity. We are determined not to do that. We will be the party of opportunity, presenting it to people who want to be nurses or hold any other position in the NHS. This NHS will be truly national only if it provides opportunity to the many, not the few.

2.22 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I must declare an interest due to my work in the NHS and having had the privilege of a grant when training to be a doctor.

The NHS is one of our most esteemed public services, but there is a long-standing shortage of qualified healthcare professionals. While the current bursary system for nursing and allied healthcare students in England may not be without issue, the UK Government’s proposed changes are concerning, as is the manner in which they have been presented, with detailed consideration of the impact somewhat lacking.

As we have heard, the UK Government have proposed changes to the current NHS bursary system. Instead, healthcare students will be required to pay tuition fees and will be subject to the same standard loans-based system to which other students in England are subjected. The UK Government have indicated that they expect the reforms to create up to 10,000 additional nursing and health professional training places over the course of the current parliament. However, that appears to be narrow-sighted. The proposed move to a system that relies on students funding themselves by taking on significant debts has raised substantial concerns among unions, professional bodies and students. One of the key fears is that such a move could be a barrier that deters prospective students from entering the profession. I stand here as the first doctor in my family, and I have to say that I would not have considered applying if it had meant racking up debt. I am particularly concerned about access to doctorate courses and postgraduate requirements. Will we create an elite workforce based not on ability, but on means?

Unison estimates that a student undertaking a three-year, 30-week course outside London under the new scheme will graduate with a debt of at least £51,600, plus interest and any overdraft and commercial debt.

Richard Graham: The hon. Lady’s achievement as the first doctor in her family is to be applauded by us all, but does she recognise that there are many people who do not think that university is for them? The two-year apprenticeship course offered by the new nursing associate route will provide them with a real opportunity to get into the NHS and maybe to go on to become a full nurse later on.

Dr Cameron: I want to see a widening of access to training schemes in the NHS, and I would hope that that would be properly funded and that we do not rely on NHS staff doing other jobs while dealing with the
stress of training. We should invest in and fund them properly, letting them know that NHS staff are invaluable. For many, loans may be higher due to the additional costs of longer courses or of courses within London. As I said, I am particularly concerned about postgraduate courses and doctorate trainees, who may not be able to afford further loans that will add to their debt. It is likely that debt could be considerably higher for the majority of healthcare students. It is naive to think that larger loans will not be a psychological deterrent, especially to those from poorer or non-university backgrounds or to mature students and career changers, who may have additional financial responsibilities or debts from first degrees or family life.

The demographic of students on nursing, midwifery and allied health professions courses tends to be different from other student populations, as we have heard. They are more likely to be women, from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, parents or mature students. It is therefore likely, and a real concern, that abolishing bursaries will reduce diversity, foster inequalities and discourage potentially high-quality applicants.

Angela Rayner: The hon. Lady is making an important point. Returning to something the Minister said, the frustration for me is that I was a Unison rep in homecare before coming to this place, and we were able to give unqualified women access to a foundation degree when they were healthcare assistants. They could then do a vocational degree and get into hospitals in much the same way as what the Minister claims is not currently available. It is important that that route remains open and that its users, mature students in particular, do not get disadvantaged because of the thousands of pounds worth of debt that they would take on at the end.

Dr Cameron: The hon. Lady makes her own point. It is important that people from all backgrounds are encouraged to enter our NHS. The UK has a diverse society and we must ensure that our healthcare staffing system reflects that and supports those from all backgrounds to enter it.

It is not enough just to increase numbers by creating an open market for training. In order to ensure a quality service, it is crucial that student placements are well planned, well supervised and well distributed between the various areas within the service, so much consultation is required. In response to the Government’s proposals, a former chief executive of the Royal College of Nursing commented:

“The last thing we need are disincentives to recruitment. We should be doing everything possible to attract applicants, as the country needs more nurses now than at any other time in its history.”

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making many valid points. If someone lives in Wales and wants to study at an English university, it is proposed that the bursary will be stopped. If someone lives in England, Scotland or Northern Ireland and wants to study nursing, midwifery or an allied health profession at a Welsh university, the Labour Welsh Government will pay the bursary. Taking that to its logical conclusion, the numbers will decrease in England and increase in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Of most concern is the fact that the UK Government did not commit to undertake an impact assessment of cross-border applications before proceeding with the changes. Does the hon. Lady think that they should have?

Dr Cameron: Once again, the hon. Lady makes her point very well. I believe we need to staff the NHS well right across the UK. Impact assessments may require consideration down the line if there is a shortage in England as a result of this policy. I hope that answers her question.

In Scotland, the SNP Government recognise the value of investing in our NHS, providing a support package that is hugely generous in comparison with that in England. The nursing and midwifery student bursary in Scotland provides all eligible students with a non-income-assessed and non-repayable personal allowance of £6,578 per year, excluding additional allowances. That can be topped up by a range of income-assessed allowances. It is important that that remains the case. As I said, I am particularly concerned about postgraduate courses and doctorate trainees, who may not be able to afford further loans that will add to their debt. It is important that that route remains open and that its users, mature students in particular, do not get disadvantaged because of the thousands of pounds worth of debt that they would take on at the end.

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“The last thing we need are disincentives to recruitment. We should be doing everything possible to attract applicants, as the country needs more nurses now than at any other time in its history.”

Several hon. Members rose—
Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before I call the first Back-Bench speaker, I should say that we are going to have a time limit of seven minutes to start with. The debate finishes at 4.27 pm and a large number of people wish to speak.

2.33 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Let me start by congratulating the shadow Health Secretary on calling this important debate. First and foremost, it matters because of the impact on patients of a nursing workforce shortfall. When the Health Committee’s recent primary care inquiry took evidence, Professor Ian Cumming estimated that shortfall to be between 15,000 and 20,000 nurses. This is not just about the overall shortfall; it is also about shortfalls geographically and in certain key areas, particularly primary care, community care and mental health. We therefore need to look at the big picture.

The workforce shortfall adds costs. We know that the agency staffing bill was about £3.3 billion in the last year and that three quarters of trusts are still breaching the agency price caps, although we are making some progress on that, with the relevant figures being £303 million in October last year and £287 million in February this year. These resources should be spent elsewhere, on patient care. There is an over-dependence on nurses who are trained overseas. They are a very valued part of our workforce but they are often being recruited from countries that can ill afford to lose them. We will need to train more nurses—that is the prime consideration of this debate, along with how we achieve that.

I congratulate the Minister on the proposals to open up many more places to nursing students, but we should consider some unintended consequences and I wish to touch on those further in this debate. We must do this without disadvantaging or cutting off our current core nursing workforce. It is absolutely right that we pay particular attention to the impact on mature students, because we have heard the data on that: 23% of all nursing students are over 21 and the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) said, the average age is 28. The question is whether this core mature nursing workforce are going to be deterred from applying.

We have already seen an example of innovation, with the University of Bolton partnering the Lancashire Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust to start offering places where students apply through the UCAS route. They introduced 25 places in the first pilot, with the first intake being in February last year, and there were 650 applicants for those places, even though they knew that they would have to access loans. There has been a very successful second round, with an increase to 75 places this year, and so the assumption that people will simply not apply for these courses just is not correct. We need to bear it in mind that we cannot necessarily extrapolate from there to a wider increase in numbers, but I ask the Minister whether there is any room, as we start to roll this out, to retain some bursaries for our very valued core mature nursing workforce for at least the first few years, until we know what the impact is. Will he address that in his summing up? Is there any role for a period of transition? It is important that we bear in mind the potential for unintended consequences.

Two thirds of those who apply for nursing places are unsuccessful, and it is unreasonable not to increase the opportunity for those students. I very much welcome the Minister’s plan to roll out other opportunities to enter the nursing workforce. We know from the Cavendish review that one reason we lose so many from our core healthcare assistant workforce is because there are no continuing professional development opportunities for them. Very many of those people, whom we know to be fantastic at their job, are not able to progress in the way that we should be allowing them to do. The key focus for us in this House should be: what is best for patients? What is best for patients is for us to train up a more diverse workforce, through many routes. There is a case for saying, “Let’s not completely abolish bursaries in the first round. We could phase things in more slowly.”

Another opportunity we could look at to try to attract people into nursing is through recognising that the clinical component is very high in the nursing course, at about 50%. Is there any way we could recognise that with a limited grants system for those who would otherwise be deterred? Perhaps at the end of a nursing course we could recognise mature students, particularly those who have taken on a second degree. Is there a way we could allow an extra payment to go to those nurses, particularly those who are going to go on to train in specialties where there is a shortage, linked with a period of NHS service. I know that we are using such an approach in general practice to try to attract people into shortage specialties. Would the Minister also consider that in responding to the legitimate concerns about the impact on the mature nursing workforce?

In summary, there are things we are doing where we are making progress, but there are things we can recognise as being unintended consequences. I hope the Minister will also look at some of the other recommendations from the recent Health Committee inquiry on primary care and say, “What can we do, as we increase the number of these courses, to increase the exposure to shortage specialties within the training period?” Too many of our healthcare workforce are staying within acute care and we know that if they have increased exposure to primary care during their training, they are more likely to want to go into those specialties.

Finally, as we increase these other opportunities for nursing and physician associates, may I ask the Minister please to touch on registration? We have heard evidence that, sometimes, not being registered can deter people from taking on physician associates. Allowing those associates to be registered is a recognition of their skills. These should be professional qualifications, and I hope that he will refer to that in his summing up.

2.40 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), as I have a lot of respect for her. Indeed, she commands respect across the House, and it is important that we listen to her views. It is also important that we listen to the views of others, including those of her colleague the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who said: “Speaking as a nurse, I would struggle to undertake my nurse training given the proposed changes to the bursary scheme.”—[Official Report, 5 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 15.] Clearly, the changes have not been thought through.
As a south Manchester MP, I am very proud to represent a large number of Manchester University students, including many of our nurses and midwives of the future. Indeed, the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work at the university was the first institution in England to offer a nursing course, and it remains one of the top 10 universities in the world to study that same degree today. For the 2,000 students currently studying there, as well as for those weighing up their future with healthcare education in mind, the proposals on student bursaries will do nothing to instil any confidence that the Government understand the perspective of student nurses or potential student nurses.

I want to use my brief remarks to raise two main points. The first is the disappointing lack of consultation with organisations such as the Royal College of Nursing, and the second is the effect that this policy will have on potential students and patient care. Ensuring that access to these professions remains fair, that their funding is sustainable and that the Government consult experts from the sector are vital factors in securing the interests and the confidence of future healthcare professionals. Those roles are the lifeblood of our national health service, and we all have a stake in their future.

One big concern that we have consistently raised is the Government’s reluctance to engage with stakeholders. We have heard from charities, representative organisations, and think-tanks that the evidence base for these proposals is at best uncertain, and at worst non-existent. The very real fear is that the proposals will reduce the numbers of people entering nursing studies. Even the 12-week consultation that the Minister was lauding earlier takes the form of a technical questionnaire on the implementation of the proposals rather than a real consultation on the substantive policy.

Richard Graham: On consultation with stakeholders and so on, does the hon. Gentleman agree that when a hospital such as the Gloucestershire Royal shows strong support for the concept of nursing associates and wants to run a pilot project for them, we have to assume that it sees real value in those associates in terms of providing good nursing for its patients and my constituents, and that that must be as telling as anything in a formal consultation?

Jeff Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Parliamentary questions have shown that the Department of Health failed to consult the Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of Nursing and Unison before the policy was announced. We have heard from charities, representative organisations, and think-tanks that the evidence base for these proposals is at best uncertain, and at worst non-existent. The very real fear is that the proposals will reduce the numbers of potential students and patient care. Ensuring that access to these professions remains fair, that their funding is sustainable and that the Government consult experts from the sector are vital factors in securing the interests and the confidence of future healthcare professionals. Those roles are the lifeblood of our national health service, and we all have a stake in their future.

One big concern that we have consistently raised is the Government’s reluctance to engage with stakeholders. We have heard from charities, representative organisations, and think-tanks that the evidence base for these proposals is at best uncertain, and at worst non-existent. The very real fear is that the proposals will reduce the numbers of people entering nursing studies. Even the 12-week consultation that the Minister was lauding earlier takes the form of a technical questionnaire on the implementation of the proposals rather than a real consultation on the substantive policy.

Richard Graham: On consultation with stakeholders and so on, does the hon. Gentleman agree that when a hospital such as the Gloucestershire Royal shows strong support for the concept of nursing associates and wants to run a pilot project for them, we have to assume that it sees real value in those associates in terms of providing good nursing for its patients and my constituents, and that that must be as telling as anything in a formal consultation?

Jeff Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Parliamentary questions have shown that the Department of Health failed to consult the Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of Nursing and Unison before the policy was announced in the autumn statement last year. It is not just the Labour party that is worried about this, but the Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of Nursing, the College of Podiatry, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists and the NHS Pay Review Body, as well as Members across the House. It is little surprise, then, that the result fails to understand the unique characteristics of the sector and the hard-working professionals that work in it. This is a process that has been driven by short-term financial savings at the cost of tackling the big questions of how we adequately fund our NHS for the decades to come.

What about the effect of this policy on the nurses and midwives of the future? At the centre of any policy on healthcare education must be the students themselves. In this case, they are diverse—older than most—the average age is 28—and overwhelmingly female. There are greater numbers from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. We should not forget that completing a degree necessitates 2,300 hours of clinical practice over three years. Any legislation that we need to design to encourage students in the future and to guarantee high-quality care for patients must recognise those types of people. They are people like Katie, a nurse in my constituency, who wrote to me about her concerns about the prospect of debt. She said:

“It is particularly worrying for mature students, many of whom have dependants, and it could deter them from joining the profession altogether. I can relate to this as three of my close colleagues are mature students and have stated on multiple occasions that, without the bursary, nursing school would not have been an option. Student nurses are not like other students: 50% of their time is spent on unpaid clinical placements in hospitals and in the community and there are simply not the same opportunities for part-time work as other students. I could not have completed this course without the bursary. Studying nursing requires participation in extra-curricular activities. This is in line with a recent national initiative: revalidation... Therefore, finding time for part-time work becomes very difficult, and many of my friends have been turned away from part-time jobs as our weekly schedules, working shifts and time for completing university work are often sporadic. The bursary covers my rent and without that I would not be able to support myself and nor would my family.”

We need to take such views on board when looking at a new policy.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Research from the House of Commons has shown that of the net savings made to the Treasury through measures taken by this Government since 2010, 86% will have come from women. Does my hon. Friend agree that these proposals are no different from those we have seen in the junior doctors’ contract dispute, and that they will adversely affect women rather than men?

Jeff Smith: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. It is important to remember that, and to think about how the prospect of paying off more than £100,000 worth of debt affects the calculation of a mature student looking to study a second time to become a mental health nurse. It is important to think about how a lone parent, who is hoping to become a midwife, might feel the pressure of £59,000 of repayments when considering the future of their family—that is the latest estimate of debt from the Royal College of Midwives.

It is important to wonder how a nursing student, taking part in a 48-week extended course, is expected to find part-time work to make their studies viable. Not only is the Government’s evidence base desperately weak, but research by the Higher Education Funding Council for England tells us that poorer students, lone parents and BME students—the demographics of many of the people attracted to nursing—are disproportionately dissuaded from applying to university by the prospect of large debts.

The policy fails on two fronts. The refusal to engage with experts in the field has led to a misguided policy that makes healthcare education the privilege of those who can afford decades of debt. It fails to ensure fair and equal access to healthcare education. Secondly,
there is a real danger that this policy will fail to achieve its own aim of attracting future students. Everyone in health who knows about these issues will acknowledge the shortages of nurses, midwives and other health professionals, but moving the burden of payment to students is widely seen as a mistake. Deterring potential candidates by promising a lifetime of repayments immediately on graduation cannot be the answer.

I conclude by joining the calls of the Royal College of Midwives and the Royal College of Nursing for the Government to rethink the proposals and to scrap the NHS bursary. We need a thorough and inclusive consultation process so that those with experience of the system are able to contribute properly. I ask Ministers to ensure that future students at Manchester University’s School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work are not forced to bear the burden of a Government unwilling to listen. The Royal College of Nursing has said that the Government have not thought hard enough about the risks. Now is the time to do so.

2.49 pm

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), and I congratulate the shadow Health Secretary on securing this debate as it highlights the current pressures that we are facing in the NHS. We start with 20,000 nurses and we lose 3,000 a year. Perhaps that is where the Migration Advisory Committee report gets its figures from when it says that we need to plug a gap of 3,000 places. The Government say that we need 10,000 new nurses a year. In stark terms, those figures show that there is a loss percentage, so perhaps we can work out how many people drop out and what it costs, and use that money in the NHS by putting it back into an apprenticeship scheme such as that proposed by the Government. It seems that the magic figure of 3,000 plays into the Government’s thinking about creating 10,000 new nurses.

The Opposition say that we lost 2,400 nurses under the previous Government, whereas the previous Government said that we have 3,000 more. Which is correct? The truth is that both are: it depends when we take the measurement. If we measure from election to election—that is, from May 2010 to May 2014—we find that the Prime Minister was correct to say that we have 3,000 new nurses. We also take into consideration health visitors and midwives, and physiotherapists to an extent. The Opposition say there was a drop of 2,400 between September 2010 and September 2014. Believe it or not, these people only through a technical consultation rather than through a consultation of all stakeholders on the principle of the policy, as they ought to have done.

What is the difference between a student nurse starting on £21,000 or thereabouts a year and a junior doctor starting on £26,000? Nurses are as valued as doctors in the NHS; I certainly feel that. Why do some have bursaries, even though we are not attracting the numbers, and why do some not have them? My own trust, which is in difficulty at the moment but has already overcome many difficulties and is out of administration—it should be praised for that—has been abroad recruiting nurses, but we could get the nurses by taking away the bursary scheme and opening it up to academia, trying to get more people in from inside the system through apprenticeships. That could plug the gap and allow us to have home-grown skills and jobs here.

Reform will plug the gap and solve the skill shortage. It will also be fair in bringing nurses into line with doctors in the profession. Mature students who want to go into the vocation of nursing and be correctly accredited through the academic route will see that as a good starting place for a career that starts at £21,000. In all honesty, the career path does not end at £21,000; it goes up the pay scale, as it does for doctors.

In conclusion, I thank all colleagues for this measured debate. This is a subject that we need to address on both sides of the House.

2.53 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I thank the shadow Health Secretary and the shadow Health team for securing this important debate this afternoon, which effectively gives us the opportunity to debate early-day motion 1081, which is set to become the most popular early-day motion in this Session of Parliament. It has been signed by Members from across the House, including Government Members, because of the concerns that people have bravely shown about the potential consequences of the Government’s proposed decision on the NHS bursary.

As I have argued before in Adjournment debates on the Floor of the House and in Westminster Hall, what we are debating this afternoon is the biggest shake-up in the funding of nursing, midwifery and allied health subjects since 1968. It was announced, without adequate evidence and planning, as part of the Chancellor’s Budget rather than being a carefully thought-through policy proposal; that is why the Government are consulting people only through a technical consultation rather than through a consultation of all stakeholders on the principle of the policy, as they ought to have done.

Although I and others will refer to “student nurses and midwives” as shorthand, it is important to acknowledge, as my hon. Friend the shadow Health Secretary did, that this will affect students of all sorts of subjects and vital workers being trained in a range of aspects of the NHS—physiotherapists, occupational therapists, chiropodists, dieticians, podiatrists, radiographers, paramedics, prosthetists and others. That is why more than 100 right hon. and hon. Members signed the early-day motion and thousands of members of the public have spoken out through the online petition.

At present, nursing, midwifery and allied health subjects are not subject to tuition fees and students on those courses receive a non-means-tested grant of up to £1,000 a year as well as a means-tested bursary of up to £3,191 a year. That recognises that students of these subjects have to work considerably long hours during their
courses—not just in the libraries and lecture theatres like most students, but on clinical practice as part of a full 24-hour care cycle. Indeed, it is estimated that student nurses work at least 2,300 hours across the course of their degree. I am not sure that many of us with degrees in this House could claim to have put in so many hours when we were at university. We should recognise the effort that such students need to make to secure their qualifications.

Those who work outside course hours to fund their degrees can end up working up to 60 hours, and we should not expect them to do so: it can have a deleterious impact not just on their academic studies but on their approach to clinical practice. Under the Government’s proposals, the changes will mean that students of these subjects will be charged tuition fees in excess of £9,000 a year and, as a result, will be burdened with £51,600 of debt. They will begin paying that back as soon as they graduate, which means that nurses will take on average a pay cut of £900 a year.

As if that were not unacceptable enough on its own, will the Minister explain when he winds up how it can possibly be fair that under the proposed approach there is no recognition in the student support system of the unique demands placed on these students? The NHS bursary, as it exists, alongside the tuition fee remissions that these students effectively receive, at least recognise that for many of the students it is difficult, if not impossible, to take on the sorts of part-time work that I did when I was studying, either during my A-levels at McDonald’s or during university at the now-defunct Comet. For those students, it is simply not possible to fund their degrees in that way.

The student support system should recognise that it is more expensive to study these subjects and that the opportunities to earn extra income on top of taking the courses are not as readily available as they are for other students. It is a real mistake for the Government not to recognise that in their plan.

Dr Wollaston: Does the hon. Gentleman also accept that there is a serious problem with hardship on the existing bursaries, particularly given that the amount of the bursary drops in the final year?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful for that intervention. I shall come on to thank some of the people who have been in touch, but I will never forget the very first conversation I had with a student nurse in my constituency who sat with me in the Members’ area of Portcullis House and cried because under the existing system she struggled to meet the costs of training to be a nurse, even with the NHS bursary currently provided.

I want the student support system to be more generous for these students because other students like my constituent have dreamed of being a student nurse. It is not right that financial support, or the lack of it, should be a barrier to their taking on this valuable vocation, which does so much for so many.

The Government’s policy is riddled with risk. Earlier the Minister challenged my assertions on mature student numbers. It is a fact that in the wake of the introduction of the coalition’s reforms to higher education, there was a fall in part-time and mature student numbers. The Minister claimed that there were record numbers of mature applicants to higher education; I can only assume that he was referring to last year’s figures. We should not identify a trend from one year’s figures, not least because UCAS figures for the 2016 application cycle published on 4 February 2016 show an increase in 18-year-old applicants, but a fall in most other older age group categories. I am more than happy to look at the data and conduct an evidence-based debate, but let us have an evidence-based debate and not take one year’s worth of figures and claim that there is some sort of trend.

David Morris: The figures that the hon. Gentleman cites are welcome, but they are different from those of the shadow Health Secretary.

Wes Streeting: No, I do not disagree at all with the figures cited by my hon. Friend the shadow Health Secretary. This is the problem with lies, damned lies and statistics, as Disraeli once said. We need to look at all the data in the round before we identify trends. The Minister singled out one year’s worth of application data to identify a trend.

It is also entirely possible that numbers relating to nursing, midwifery and allied health subjects account for a significant proportion of applicants to higher education and mature applicants to higher education. The Minister was talking about general applications for all subjects. We should probably ask the Library to conduct a survey so that we can get to the bottom of the claims and counterclaims. None the less, most people involved in the higher education debate acknowledge that there are still serious challenges in access to higher education for part-time and mature applicants in the light of the coalition’s reforms. That is one of the reasons why the Government ought to tread carefully in this area.

Against this backdrop, there is a shortage of nurses. In 2011 and 2012 the number of training places was cut to the lowest level since the 1990s. Unison, the trade union of which I am proud to be a member, conducted a survey which found that two thirds of nurses believe that staffing levels were worse now than they were previously, and 63% feel that the numbers are inadequate to provide a safe degree of support on wards. That reflects feedback that I have had from NHS staff in my constituency, and it is something that the Government should take very seriously.

Since I first raised the issue in an Adjournment debate in the House, I have been privileged to meet so many nurses, midwives, other professionals and students of allied health subjects. I am particularly grateful for the campaigning that Danielle Tiplady and Kat Barber have undertaken, not least in meeting the Minister. I thank Unison, the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, and the National Union of Students. I take this opportunity to pay particular tribute to the outgoing president, Megan Dunn, for the effective way in which she has represented students during her term in office.

The reforms reflect a big risk to nursing numbers. At the very least the Minister should commit this afternoon to a further full debate on the Floor of the House and a vote of both this House and the other place before such
a radical change as the Government propose is made to the funding of these crucial subjects. There is considerable concern and the Minister should not downplay the issue. I hope he will at least commit to a full vote in the House before the change goes ahead.

3.3 pm

Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow on from the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), who made a thoughtful speech and highlighted an important point about the different study load of those training to be nurses, compared with some of us when we were at university. I do not think that that invalidates the Government’s proposals, but it is an important point to take into account.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I congratulate the Opposition spokesman on calling the debate, which has been an important one, and I congratulate the Minister on a characteristically thoughtful, reasonable and lucid response to it. I cannot help observing that the debate demonstrates the value of having people in this House who come from genuine professions, rather than having reached here purely as a result of being political professionals. There has been considerable input from those who have studied, worked or been in the national health service.

Although it is an Opposition debate, there are some points that we can all agree on. First, we should agree that we need to recruit, train and retain enough nurses to staff our health service to meet the needs of the British people. Secondly, we can agree that it is wrong—morally wrong—to rely on recruiting nurses from poor countries, who have had to bear the cost of their training, to meet our failure to train enough nurses ourselves. Thirdly, we should not be turning away British people who want to train as nurses when we need more nurses. Surely all of us can agree on those three points. We can debate how best we finance the recruitment, retention and motivation of sufficient nurses in this country, but we should all agree that that is the objective.

My initial interest in this topic came a couple of decades ago and resulted from my first career as a development economist working in Africa and Asia. I discovered while I was in the House that we were denuding Africa of nurses. We had recruited more than one in eight of all the nurses in sub-Saharan Africa and brought them to this country. That could not be right. I lobbied against it and the then Prime Minister promised that there would be no active recruitment from Africa, but seven years later I discovered that we had recruited another 60,000 nurses. We were continuing to recruit at several thousand a year, but we were promised that that would cease.

What I blame myself for is that it took me so long to realise that the problem did not lie so much in recruiting from Africa and other poor parts of the world as in our failure in this country to train enough nurses of our own. I did not ask why we were not doing so until I was talking to people in my local NHS, who told me that they were recruiting abroad, mainly in southern Europe but also in Asia, and they were doing so despite the fact that they would have preferred to recruit and employ nurses from the University of Hertfordshire, whom they described as excellent, well trained and in every way desirable. I asked why they did not recruit more, but they said that they could not recruit enough. Even if they recruited the next several years’ worth of output, that would not meet the needs of Hertfordshire’s health service, which is why they were recruiting abroad.

Dr Lisa Cameron: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is ironic that through our international aid programmes we are assisting developing countries to pay for trainee placements in clinical establishments such as hospitals abroad, yet we do not afford the same rights to our NHS trainees here?

Mr Lilley: It is certainly bizarre that we pay African countries to train nurses and promptly recruit them to come here, so we are getting them cheaply trained abroad. I do not mind particularly the manner in which their training is financed.

The problem faced by my local NHS was that it could not get enough nurses from the University of Hertfordshire. I spoke to the University of Hertfordshire, which said that there was no lack of applicants—it turned away three quarters of applicants to its highly regarded nursing courses—but it was not allowed to expand. It had taken me decades in this House to realise that we had a system that limited the number of people we were recruiting. I duly lobbied the Government, and it may be because of my lobbying that we now have this proposal for bursaries, though I suspect the Government reached their own evidence.

The sad truth is that successive Ministers of all parties—we should recognise that—have bucked the question of how we train enough people in this country. Ministers tend to have a time horizon of roughly the time it takes to train a nurse, so why put up with diverting resources into training when the output of extra nurses will come after they have ceased to be Health Ministers? I am glad that this Secretary of State for Health and his fellow Ministers have addressed the question. However, we should recognise that it is symptomatic of a wider problem across British business in both the private and the public sector that we have a culture that does not put enough emphasis on training. It is particularly bizarre that we allow unlimited numbers of people in universities to study art history and media studies—very valuable subjects—but restrict the numbers who can train to be nurses, when we know we have a crying and desperate need for more.

I am agnostic about the best way to finance the training of more nursing recruits. Clearly, if nurses bear the extra cost, that will have to be reflected in some way in their remuneration. The Minister told us that they will actually be no worse off, so I suppose the assumption is that they will not have to repay much of their loans. It is a somewhat artificial feature of the public finance rules, but it is a feature of them, that perhaps the only way of not borrowing the money from the public ourselves is for the nurses to borrow it and for us then to write off their loans. However, whatever the financial system—the end of bursaries and their replacement with loans is probably the only option—we have to pay nurses enough in the long run to recruit, retain and motivate them.

There is one other issue we should look at before we close the debate. There are 200,000 trained nurses who maintain themselves on the register at their own expense, but who are not currently working in the NHS or elsewhere—they may be taking time off to raise a family, and they may be thinking about coming back...
some time. We must be much more flexible and creative about providing patterns of work that meet the family needs of those trained, valuable, caring and experienced people if we are to bring them back into the health service. That, too, will help to meet the needs of the health service, as the Government are trying to, sensibly and wisely, in the measures they have brought before us to replace bursaries with loans.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to today’s important debate. This is the second time I have raised concerns about the Government’s plans to scrap NHS bursaries in favour of a loans-based system for nursing, midwifery and allied health profession students, and it follows my contribution to a Westminster Hall debate on the same subject in January. I do not propose to reiterate in their entirety the arguments I put forward; instead, I intend to make just a few brief observations on the Government’s proposals, which have been roundly condemned by students, trade unions and professional bodies alike. They have been described by one of those bodies—the Royal College of Nursing—as “high risk”.

The proposals are high risk because they take a significant gamble with the future sustainability of the NHS workforce. There are several reasons for that.

First, the proposals have the potential to deter many committed and talented prospective students from pursuing nursing, midwifery and allied health profession degrees altogether. That is due primarily to concerns over the huge level of debt associated with the change to a loans-based system. That is particularly true for more debt-averse mature students, who may have young families, caring responsibilities and a mortgage to pay, and for those for whom healthcare is a profession degree.

There is a considerable problem with recruitment and retention of staff in the NHS, and the Government’s plans are likely to exacerbate that problem, so impacting adversely on the future security of the NHS workforce. This is at a time when we have an ageing and increasing population, which will require more, not fewer, front-line healthcare professionals.

Secondly, the proposals do not take into consideration the fact that nursing, midwifery and allied health profession courses are very different from most arts and science degrees. These courses are much longer, with shorter holidays, and they offer fewer opportunities for students to supplement their incomes, as people are required to spend a significant amount of time working with patients in clinical practice, with a requirement to work irregular and long evening and weekend shifts as standard. Effectively, the Government’s proposals will mean that these students—the individuals who keep our wards running and who are involved in life-and-death decisions on a daily basis—are forced to pay for the privilege of undertaking often physically and emotionally demanding work in the NHS.

Thirdly, the proposals seek to replace the bursary system, which has, for some considerable time now, fostered strong and enduring links between healthcare students and the NHS right from the start of their course. The Government propose severing that link, which risks reducing students’ loyalty to, and the attractiveness of, the NHS as a potential employer.

Those are just a few of the reasons why the Government’s plans are so high risk. There are, of course, many more, some of which have been eloquently articulated by others in the House today. I conclude by urging Ministers to drop their proposals and instead work with trade unions, professional bodies and, most importantly, the dedicated individuals who work in the NHS—the nurses, midwives, physiotherapists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, dieticians, radiographers, chiropodists and podiatrists—to find a fairer, more sustainable and effective funding solution.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): May I start by declaring my interest as a member of a healthcare profession allied to nursing?

Two thirds of those who apply for nursing school places are rejected and have to look at other trades or professions—that is tens of thousands of people every year. Despite the comments of some hon. Members, those are good, high-quality applicants. I took the trouble of looking at the entry requirements of the three universities that accept adult candidates on to general nursing degree courses in the south-west—Bournemouth University, the University of the West of England and Plymouth University. The typical offer is 300 UCAS points—three Bs at A-level—so there is not a shortage of applicants who are academically well-qualified and, indeed, qualified in every way. Lots of young men and women who wish to study nursing and to be nurses are being turned away.

That is a double tragedy because we have a gross shortage of nurses in this country, and nothing I have heard from the Opposition gives me any confidence that they have any plan as to how we are to satisfy the two imperatives of allowing those who want to study nursing to do so and of plugging the shortage in our national health service. At the moment, I am afraid, we are able to deal with that issue only because nurses from overseas are prepared to come here—nurses, very often, from countries that can scarcely do without them.

Historically, student nurses have been an intrinsic part of the NHS workforce. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) will remember, as do I, that they were essential to the working of hospital wards, and one or two of the good points made by Opposition Members revolve around that issue. The question is whether, in this day and age, we are still heavily reliant on that workforce for the proper functioning of hospital wards. If we are, there is a good case to be made for allowing for that in the bursary arrangements for student nurses, because it is simply not right to expect those people to do service work and not be compensated in some way for it. I hope very much that that strand of thought will be taken up as part of the consultation.

However, the fact remains that as part of Project 2000 in the 1990s, the nursing profession decided to move away from a hospital-based training structure to a structure based around universities—that was driven by the profession itself. The debate we are having today is part of that process—the process by which nurses become graduates, in exactly the same way as anyone else, including those who are preparing, for example, to teach in schools.
When we design the finances for student nurses, it is of course important that we understand the difference between a nursing degree course and a normal degree course. We need to understand that nursing graduates are an intrinsic part of the NHS, and that it is not right to try—as I think the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), who speaks for the Opposition, did—to distinguish between graduates and to say that one graduate is more worthy than another. She may have in mind a view of a typical graduate, but those graduates are also potential teachers, engineers, biomedical scientists, and all the rest. We start down a very difficult path if we try to hold up one graduate as being superior morally, or in some other sense, to others. That is a very difficult thing to sustain.

I very much support the notion of a nursing associate. I am old enough to remember state-enrolled nurses. These were nurses who would not satisfy the entry criteria for a course leading to state registration but wanted to be members of a caring occupation. Naturally enough, nursing associates will not be SENs revisited, because we now live in a very different age, but there is surely a place within healthcare and our national health service for a group of people who accept that is a hands-on, caring occupation. The important difference, though—this is where SENs, I am afraid, suffered so badly all those years ago—is that there must be a sufficiently rigorous system to allow nursing associates, if they want to and have the necessary skill sets, to enter a professional nursing stream. It was a tragedy that so many well-qualified SENs were unable to develop their careers in that way. I hope that as we design the future for nursing, we keep that very much in mind.

A few hon. Members have commented on workforce planning. Historically, the NHS has been absolutely abysmal in this regard, and we need to do much better in future. We need to avoid unintended consequences of the changes that we are making. We need to ensure that the £21,000 threshold that would apply for nursing associates, if they want to and have the necessary skill sets, to enter a professional nursing stream. It was a tragedy that so many well-qualified SENs were unable to develop their careers in that way. I hope that as we design the future for nursing, we keep that very much in mind.

The 10,000 new places created must not be denuded by our offering them to applicants from overseas, because that would not be in the interests of our national health service. We need to understand that nursing graduates may be tempted to migrate as a result of the introduction of these fees. I ask the Minister, in his consultation, to think of all the unintended consequences that may develop, given our general historical tradition in this country of doing health workforce planning so abysmally.

3.22 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the thoughtful contribution by the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), who draws attention to the whole issue of workforce planning, which is clearly very challenging for those who are doing it—or not doing it.

The recent inspection of North Lincolnshire and Goole Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust exposed issues of real concern about staffing levels at Scunthorpe general hospital. The challenge of attracting, securing and retaining sufficient nurses and other medical staff has been a constant theme in my conversations with the trust since 2010. In that respect, Scunthorpe hospital is no different from many others around the country. The more I have got involved, the more I have thought that locally designed solutions have a role to play. Having talked to Health Education England, it is disappointing that it cannot do more to support healthcare assistants, for instance, in growing into nurses on the local patch, because they are clearly a potential resource.

There are lots of issues about recruitment, training and retention, as the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) said, and about how, if we lose 3,000 nurses a year, as the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) said, we try to keep them. That is a big issue, as well as how we recruit and retain them.

David Morris: Just to clarify that, we are not losing 3,000 nurses a year—we are losing 3,000 applicants to be nurses a year.

Nic Dakin: I thank the hon. Gentleman. But many nurses are being lost to the system as well, as his comments clearly highlighted.

In Scunthorpe, as in other areas, we are having to recruit from Spain, Portugal and elsewhere in the world. Although that is helping and supporting us, it has impacts, as we have heard, on those areas of the globe from where those nurses are being recruited.

I would like to quote the words of a young student nurse—a constituent—because in some ways they capture the comments that people from around the country are making to us. Katie-May Taylor says:

“The 10,000 new places created must not be denuded by our offering them to applicants from overseas, because that would not be in the interests of our national health service. We need to understand that nursing graduates may be tempted to migrate as a result of the introduction of these fees. I ask the Minister, in his consultation, to think of all the unintended consequences that may develop, given our general historical tradition in this country of doing health workforce planning so abysmally.”

I appreciate that to other students, getting a monthly bursary must seem like a luxury, however penny I get goes towards my rent—it’s not just pocket money.

We’re seeing reports that parents are already telling their children not to go into the nursing profession and future nurses are being scared out of applying for university. This is deeply saddening; it’s such a wonderful course to be a part of and our nurses are absolutely vital in the care of society’s health and the maintenance of OUR NHS.

If the bursary is scrapped, a lot of student nurses will end up working 70 plus hours a week (placement, study time, job/s). Is a student nurse working that many hours a week safe patient care?”

Those words capture very effectively the concerns that we have.

The Government are taking a huge gamble with the future of the NHS workforce and patient safety. There is already a shortage of nurses in the NHS, and scrapping bursaries risks making the recruitment and retention of staff even harder. Student nurses are not like other students: they are required to work in clinical practice throughout their degrees, and they deserve to be treated differently. The hon. Member for South West Wiltshire was right to say that it is worth looking at how much they are an intrinsic part of the NHS, and if they are, that must be recognised within the consultation so that they are given credit and remunerated effectively for it.
My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) rightly emphasised the unique position of student nurses.

The longer courses and clinical placements make it harder for NHS students to get part-time jobs to supplement their income. NHS students are much more likely to be women, more likely to come from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, and more likely to be mature students. Many nursing students have already completed one degree and turned to nursing in their late 20s or early 30s. The average age of a student nurse is 28. Many student nurses have family or caring commitments. MillionPlus has pointed out that the changes to the higher education funding system in 2012 have been much less favourably received by mature students and part-time students. Those two groups make up a much greater proportion of the nursing, midwifery and allied health student body, so it is worth looking at that part of the evidence as well.

Analysis by London Economics estimates that the switch to loans will have a significant negative impact of minus 5% on participation, at least initially, especially if one bears in mind the composition of the student health cohort. The Government’s insistence that undergraduate and postgraduate loans will be repaid at the same time will require a repayment rate of 15% above the earnings threshold for those students accessing both undergraduate and postgraduate loans. That will be in addition to any tax, national insurance and pension contributions that will be due.

The savings to the taxpayer are questionable. The Minister was not clear about that when I pressed him on it during his opening remarks. The Department of Health estimate that taxpayers will be better off as a result of the switch is very much a short-term calculation. In fact, it is much less likely that these students will repay their loans as graduates in the 30-year repayment period than the general higher education cohort. Essentially this is a switch in responsibility for the funding of the education of the health workforce from the state to the workforce itself, and it is primarily designed to reduce the departmental budget of the Department of Health.

We need to know more about what estimate the Government have made of the percentage of second degree student loans that will be written off after a 30-year period. We need the Department of Health to provide an estimate of by how much the taxpayer will be better off. We need those figures.

All the key stakeholders have expressed concern, including the Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of Nursing, the College of Podiatry and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. Even the NHS Pay Review Body has said that “the removal of the incentive of the bursary could have an unsettling effect on the number and quality of applications for nursing training places in the early years.”

Those who are closest to what is going on are all concerned.

The Minister for Community and Social Care is a very good and thoughtful Minister, and I am sure that he is concerned about the issue. I hope that he will listen to and engage with all those bodies, which know what they are talking about. They are not making it up—their concerns are real and genuine. The Royal College of Nursing is calling on the Government to work with all stakeholders to create a model of student funding that encourages people to join the health profession that recognises the unique aspects of nursing degree courses.

I hope that the Government will take this opportunity to engage with the strong initiative proposed by the shadow Health Secretary and work together to come up with a solution that will allow us not only to recruit professionals, but to retain them into the future. As the son of a nurse and the father of a speech and language therapist, I hope that the Government are listening.

3.30 pm

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): Welcome to the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am glad that your first act has been to call me to speak.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), for whom I have a great deal of respect. He always speaks with credibility and from experience. I am more than happy to acknowledge that there are many colleagues in the House with more experience than I have of working in the NHS, particularly my hon. Friend the Members for South West Wilts (Mr. Barron) and for Totnes (Dr. Wollaston). My experience is as a customer or as a relative of someone who has been treated in the health service. I have to say that, to date, my experience has been nothing but positive. The treatment that our NHS continues to deliver to our nation is the best in the world, and Government Members can be immensely proud of that.

One of the things that I find most frustrating about our debates on the health service is the fact that the Opposition seem to think that they have a monopoly on caring for the NHS. Nothing could be further from the truth. Conservative Members care deeply about our health service and we do everything we can to support it.

It is worth saying that every Labour party election leaflet since the second world war has said, “We’ve got 24 hours to save the NHS before the Tories come into government.” It repeats that message every time. If we look at the facts, however, we will see that the truth is that the Prime Minister was the only party leader to enter the 2010 general election saying that he would protect the NHS budget. Others did not. In 2015, the Prime Minister was the only party leader who committed to the extra £8 billion support funding for the NHS when other Opposition parties would not back that figure. Today that figure has increased: this party is now backing the NHS with an extra £10 billion. We are also delivering on the aspiration of people like me, who are either customers or relatives of people who use the NHS, to get a high-quality service seven days a week.

Whenever we debate this issue, the difference between the two parties is one of credibility. The only way we have been able to deliver the extra £10 billion of funding to the health service is by having a credible economic plan that stands up to scrutiny. The great British public understand that and what it means to have a credible plan that can be delivered in government.

As a number of colleagues have said, we agree on a lot of things. No one can deny that both the Government and the Opposition acknowledge that we need more nurses, but we differ on the credible plan to deliver
them. Members on both sides of the Chamber have made speeches today acknowledging the need to deliver extra nurses, but it is only Government Members who have a credible plan to make it happen. We cannot just hope it happens, or state that it will happen, without saying where the extra money will come from. The consequence of that would be to withdraw cash from front-line services, such as existing doctors, nurses, operating theatres and wards, and put it into training.

If we want to increase the number of nurses coming into the NHS, we should not restrict the number who can be trained. It seems obvious that the way to raise the number of nurses is to lift the artificial cap on the number that we can train. I welcome the fact that the Government are considering and consulting on their options and looking to ensure that there is no artificial cap, so that we can train as many people as are inspired to go into the nursing profession.

I reiterate my admiration for those people. People leaving full-time education enter nursing not because they want to be rich but because they care and they see it as a vocation. We need to support people who have that calling and who aspire to look after those in society who find themselves ill and in need of support. We must find a system that allows them to aspire to that, whatever their background and wherever they come from. They must be able to go through their training and reach the point where they can follow their vocation.

The arguments that are being deployed against the Government’s suggestions appear similar to the ones that we heard about student loans. We were told that those from a deprived background or from more challenging areas would be put off and would not be able to find a way through the system. We need to reflect on the evidence, which shows that the opposite has happened—the number of people from challenging backgrounds going to university has gone up, even though we were told that they would not be able to go.

At the end of the process, we need an NHS that can adapt and change. There is enormous social pressure on it, and there is the challenge of getting a balance between adult social care and healthcare as society gets older. When cash is short, we must spend it on front-line services—on the doctors, nurses and drugs that can improve the lives of people who need the support of the NHS. I look forward to the consultation, and I know that the team in the Department of Health will look at the responses. I hope that we get to the right place, and that we have more nurses at the end of the process.

3.37 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I am pleased to hear that the hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) values the NHS so highly, but he might like to reflect on the fact that the coalition Government legislated to allow all NHS hospitals to make up to 49% of their money from private patients. Perhaps he will review his opinion of his party’s performance when he starts to see the number of private patients in his local hospital increase and the number of NHS patients decrease.

The Royal College of Nursing and the Royal College of Midwives are concerned that abolishing nurse bursaries and free tuition will break the historic link between the NHS and trainee nurses. I share their concern, and I believe that the Government’s proposal is part and parcel of wider changes that they are seeking to make to the culture of the NHS. They are turning the emphasis away from training people to be part of the NHS family, in which they can work with dedication throughout their working lives, towards training them to work in a fragmented health marketplace. If the plans go ahead, the nurses of the future may no longer feel the same obligation to work in the NHS and could be more inclined to work abroad or in private hospitals to pay off their debt. Who could blame them? They will feel that the Government have deserted them.

The Minister was unable to tell us what the average repayment would be, so I will let the union Unison give him the answer. It states that debt repayment will effectively mean a pay cut of more than £900 a year. The question arises of whether the changes will deter people from training to be nurses in the first place. The Royal College of Nursing and other bodies such as the Royal College of Midwives, the College of Podiatry and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists think that they will. The Government’s own consultation document estimates that a trainee nurse who takes out the maximum tuition and maintenance loans for three years will graduate with debts of between £47,712 and £51,106. Who would want to embark on a lifetime of caring for others with a debt of that size?

That brings us to the concern that the measures will lead to further shortages. We are all aware of the shortages in our hospitals. The coalition Government allowed the number of training places to fall from more than 20,000 to just 17,000 in 2011 and 2012, the lowest level since the 1990s. As a result, over 8,000 fewer nurses were trained in the 2010 to 2015 Parliament compared with 2010-11. Those cuts in training places have meant that nurse numbers have failed to keep pace with demand. According to calculations by the House of Commons Library, the number of nurses per 100,000 population has fallen from 679 in 2009 to 665.

There are real concerns that removing NHS bursaries will only make matters worse. As was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), the independent NHS Pay Review Body has said that “the removal of the incentive of the bursary could have an unsettling effect on the number and quality of applications for nursing training places in the early years. In addition, the reduction of net pay in the early years, as nurses repay their loans, will make the employment package and medium to long term reward offer an important factor in attracting high calibre students who are choosing between courses and career options.”

The Secretary of State should definitely focus on that.

The Royal College of Nursing is also concerned that there is a risk that the changes could result in an uneven distribution of students across nursing specialties and geographically across the UK. Health Education England currently commissions student places for four branches of nursing: adult, children, learning disabilities and mental health. Without workplace planning by a central body, there could be insufficient numbers across the four branches, as some may be more popular than others. There has been no indication of whether there will be any control over which sectors nurses train in for future or whether that will simply be determined by—or of course, under this Government—the market. That could leave some sectors with even greater shortages than at present.

Tuition is currently paid for by Health Education England. Under the current system, no students have to pay tuition fees and fees are not means-tested. Students
Universities UK stated that the new funding model was not a good answer, and the department was open to taking money from front-line care in the NHS. That asking for more money for their nurses could mean that it needed more funding per nurse place, but recognised of a London university that I spoke to last year. It said solve the problems, and neither was the nursing department of Kent. I am not confident that more of the same will hospitals, including those serving my constituents in and international recruitment is important to many work outside their qualification. We know that we other work outside their qualification. We know that we need more nurses, and that the current funding system also receive a non-means-tested grant of £1,000, or £1,000 pro rata for part-time students. Students also qualify for a maintenance grant or bursary, which is means-tested, as well as additional allowances when a term lasts longer than 30 weeks, and help with the costs of clinical placements. I believe that that is the appropriate way to deliver NHS nurse training. If we are to continue to have a state-run public NHS, free at the point of need, we must continue to provide bursaries for our NHS nurses. It is the very least that we owe them.

3.42 pm Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): If we ask any patients about their experience in hospital, one thing they are sure to talk about is the nurses who looked after them. In doing so, they are usually talking about both nurses and healthcare assistants—in my experience, patients do not tend to make a distinction. We know that nurses have far more interaction with patients, day to day, than doctors. Nurses' quality and time are absolutely critical to patients' experience.

Nurses are also critical to outcomes for hospital patients. Good nursing can be the difference between life and death. We have known that since Florence Nightingale, we were reminded of it by the inquiry into Mid Staffordshire and the Francis report, and we can see it from recent research into stroke outcomes. It will be clear to anyone who has looked at how Salford Royal has such good outcomes and such a good reputation—so lot of that is because of the focus on extraordinarily high standards of nursing.

The excellent NHS that I believe we all want needs excellent nurses. It also needs enough of them. This afternoon, people have talked about how we need something in the order of perhaps 10,000 to 20,000 more nurses—the numbers range widely. We also know that we need a shift in nursing skills, as we will need more nursing care for older people and people with long-term conditions, as well as more mental health nursing.

Right now, however, there are not enough nurses in our system, and hospitals across the country have vacancies. We know that they use large numbers of agency staff, and international recruitment is important to many hospitals, including those serving my constituents in Kent. I am not confident that more of the same will solve the problems, and neither was the nursing department of a London university that I spoke to last year. It said that it needed more funding per nurse place, but recognised that asking for more money for their nurses could mean taking money from front-line care in the NHS. That was not a good answer, and the department was open to a new funding model.

Last summer, the Council of Deans of Health and Universities UK stated that the "current funding system is no longer working for either students or universities."

Universities have to subsidise the cost of nursing and physio degrees from other courses, and NHS-funded nursing students have less to live on than others, even though they often study longer, more intense degrees with more hours, and are therefore even less able to do other work outside their qualification. We know that we need more nurses, and that the current funding system is not working.

How should we get more nurses? Around 2008-09, when plans were being drawn up for the Centre for Workforce Intelligence, I remember hearing that the answer was better workforce planning, with lots of skilled experts doing fabulous modelling of future workforce demands. I remember being a sceptic about that then, because when we consider the history of the NHS, and systems around the world that have centralised planning for the healthcare workforce, we find that it is almost always wrong. There are periods of over-supply and of under-supply—right now, we are in a period of under-supply, with all its knock-on consequences. Doing things better and having more experts sounds great in theory, but in practice we have seen that it does not work.

A much better answer is to set universities free to offer more places to all those students who, as we have heard, want to study nursing but are currently being turned away. I hope that we will have more nursing applicants, and that that career will become even more attractive, particularly as universities work more closely with employers on what is needed, and we must consider more of the specialist skills and expertise required within nursing by our care system now and in future.

To do that we must uncouple the funding of nurse training from the NHS, and take away the constraint that every £1 spent on training an NHS nurse is £1 potentially taken from front-line care, because that puts a premium on avoiding excess nurses. That is the right direction of travel, and it is also important to increase maintenance grants for nurses so that they do not struggle with their living costs as currently happens. There should be more routes into nursing. The nurse associate role is welcome, as is the apprenticeship route so that nurses can work and train in parallel. We know that that is appealing to more mature students who need an income and who want to be more hands-on during their training, and for whom a university environment has less appeal. Having worked for some time with healthcare assistants, I would like more recognition to be given to their role and qualifications, and I recognise the opportunity to support them even more to train to become qualified nurses.

We must invest more in continuous professional development for nurses. We know that we need a more flexible workforce that can adapt to future demands, yet in times of financial pressure, the investment and time given to ongoing training are often squeezed. Let us use this opportunity to try to shift that balance, and repurpose the workforce to meet the system's demands and needs.

I would also like more attention paid to the appeal of nursing and the experiences of nurses in work. I have heard many nurses on the frontline say, “This weekend, I'll be on my own—I will be the only permanent nurse on this ward. I will be working alongside agency nurses who do not necessarily know this ward, and it will make this weekend really difficult.” We badly need to put an end to that. The only way to do that, alongside the ongoing work to reduce the use of agency staff, is to increase the number of nurses who have been trained to work in the NHS.

I am out of time, but to sum up I think the direction of travel is absolutely right. Let us make sure that we get the details right on how the proposals are put into practice.
3.50 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am pleased to be able to contribute to the debate; I only hope that my somewhat scratchy throat holds out. With that in mind I have curtailed my remarks, and, with apologies to colleagues, I will not be taking interventions.

My contribution today marks the third occasion on which I have spoken on this issue and called on the Government to keep the NHS bursary for students in England who are studying to become the next generation of nurses, midwives and allied health professionals. The bursary is absolutely vital to ensure enough people are able to start and complete a nursing degree: the Royal College of Nursing and the BMA say so—and, perhaps more importantly, my sister says so. Luckily for student nurses in Scotland, the Scottish National party also says so.

I am very much aware that this debate is about the removal of the bursary offered to students in England; however, the SNP has said that it will be an ally to progressive voices in this place fighting Tory austerity. The Scottish Government provide bursary support, and will continue to do so. We want that same level of support to be offered to all eligible nursing students, regardless of where they study. As well as receiving representations from my sister, I have met nursing students based at my local university, the University of the West of Scotland. UWS helps to train and educate 4,000 nursing students, one of the largest cohorts in Scotland. It does a fantastic job in helping to equip tomorrow’s health workers with the skills, education and qualifications they need when working on the ward.

It has been over five months since I posed a question on this very issue to the Chancellor, when he stood in at Prime Minister’s questions. Unfortunately, his answer did not provide the commitment that nursing students were demanding. After a few months of contemplation, and notwithstanding the Health Minister’s opening remarks, I urge the Chancellor and his party colleagues to consider abandoning their plans to remove the NHS bursary.

The Royal College of Nursing, which has a membership of about 435,000 nurses, midwives, health visitors, nursing students and healthcare assistants, has made representations to the SNP, outlining its complete opposition to the Government’s plans. It must be highlighted that it is not only students in England who are pleading with the Government to abandon their plans. The vast majority of other medical professionals, students and workers in Scotland are demanding that the NHS bursary package is retained.

It is important to understand why nursing students receive a different funding settlement from other students. I know only too well the long hours my sister and her colleagues spent studying when she was at university. Nursing students study and work longer hours on their course than other students. They spend a considerable amount of time on the ward, learning alongside fully qualified nurses and other health professionals. I am aware that the students value the time they spend working in hospitals and I also know that they are put through their paces while on the ward. Replacing the bursary package with a maintenance loan will effectively mean that students are paying the Government for the privilege of working when on placement.

We need to be mindful that the majority of our nursing students are women who are older than the typical student. The RCN suggests that the average age of nursing students is 29 and many have caring responsibilities. In addition, it is not uncommon for these students to work part-time, alongside studying and despite the particular demands of the course. It is only right and proper that they should have a funding support package that meets their particular circumstances.

As we have heard, a coalition including Unison, the National Union of Students, the Royal College of Midwives, the British Dental Association and others, states that the new system will lead to students accumulating debt of £51,000.

Many dream about working in our NHS. Instead of putting roadblocks in their way—let us be clear: the removal of the NHS bursary will deter people from choosing to study to become a health professional—we should be looking to incentivise and encourage people from all backgrounds to consider a career in our NHS. This point was made by the Royal College of Midwives, which said:

“The cuts are likely to deter many potential students from entering the profession which is not good news for the future of midwifery in the UK...The axing of student bursaries will inevitably make midwifery an unattainable and less attractive profession to thousands of potentially excellent midwives that our maternity services so badly need.”

The Chancellor and the Health Secretary may claim that the current system is unaffordable, but I disagree. I encourage them to look at the Scottish Government for guidance on how to support the health workers of tomorrow.

In contrast to the UK Government’s desire to abolish bursary support for nursing students, the Scottish Government will provide over £6,500 to them. The UK Government previously operated a means-tested system; the Scottish Government will continue to offer the bursary to all of these students—without means-testing. Where the UK Government sanction charges of up to £9,000 a year for a university education, the Scottish Government have preserved the right of a free education. Where the UK Government work against the health and education partners, the Scottish Government work with these bodies, in partnership, to ever improve on the education and health services that exist in Scotland.

There are 41% more qualified nurses and midwives per head of population in Scotland than there are in England. Yet despite that, we have committed to increase nursing and midwifery student numbers by 5.6% in the next academic year. On average, there are 1,000 extra nurses in training in each and every year in comparison with the previous Scottish Executive.

The Government need to stop attacking the health service and those who work in our wards and clinics. If the Prime Minister is serious about running a one nation Government, he needs to listen and engage with the concerns being raised by nursing students and others right across the health and university sectors.

3.55 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I congratulate the shadow Health team on securing this debate.

Just a few weeks ago, I found myself in a packed lecture theatre in Cambridge. I had been invited there by Giovanna Mead. She is a student nurse, and the room was packed full of her colleagues. They were...
angry—not for themselves, but for those in the years ahead who should be following in their footsteps. They were absolutely convinced and absolutely sure that if the Government’s changes go ahead, people like them would not be doing as they had done. They would not be embarking on the training that is so essential to the future of our NHS.

Those people are rightly furious that there seems to be a complete misunderstanding about just how different they are as a cohort from other students, and just how different their course is from other courses. There has been a complete failure to understand how their course involves being at work and sometimes, as they explained, going way beyond the call of duty. Being at work is different from just being on a course. The testimonies of these nurses and those of others across the country speak volumes. I pay tribute to the Royal College of Nursing for pulling together hundreds and hundreds of these stories. What makes the Minister so sure that he knows so much better than all these people, who are actually doing nursing and who know and understand the choices that people in their situation are likely to make?

Before I was elected here, I worked for Unison and met many student nurses, so I know that the Government fail to understand the simple truth that nursing, midwifery and allied health professional students are not like other students. One important and fundamental difference lies in the requirement that healthcare students spend a significant proportion of their studies on clinical placements. As the Royal College of Nursing points out, and as others have said,

“student nurses aren’t like other students. 50 per cent of their time is spent in clinical practice working directly with patients and their families and they have a longer academic year.”

Indeed, student nurses must spend a minimum of 2,300 hours on clinical placement during their studies—working, providing care and making a vital contribution to the health service. This often includes early shifts, night shifts and weekend shifts. In practice, the funding changes being driven through will charge students to go to work and to do a job that is desperately needed.

Furthermore, it is clear that these changes are being rushed through without proper consideration of their consequences. The Government say that they will create 10,000 new nursing, midwifery and allied health degree places, which would be welcome if it were to happen—particularly at a time when agency staff are plugging the staffing gap and draining NHS finances. It has not been made at all clear, however, that the resources are in place to support an influx of new students in clinical settings. Put simply, do the placements exist?

This concern is linked to a wider issue about the uncoupling of education commissioning and workforce planning. The potential consequences of a disconnection between university recruitment and NHS workforce planning must be addressed, and I would welcome the Minister’s comments on the risk this uncoupling poses to the ability of the NHS to best assess and plan workforce requirements.

**Wes Streeting:** One of the more interesting aspects of the Government’s proposals is to increase routes through non-degree courses. In view of the report of *The Lancet* in February 2014, does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should tread carefully here? Based on data across nine European countries, it suggested that every 10% increase in the number of Bachelor degree-educated nurses in a hospital is associated with a 7% decline in patient mortality. Even on the more positive aspects of the proposals, does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should tread much more carefully than they are?

**Daniel Zeichner:** My hon. Friend has made an interesting point, and I hope it is one that the Minister will address.

There are other ways in which student nurses, midwives and allied health professionals are different. As we know, they are more likely to be older, to be women, to come from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, to have children, and to have first degrees already. The average age of a new nurse is 28. Those characteristics matter, because they increase the likelihood that the changes in funding for healthcare degree places will be a disincentive to the undertaking of degrees. According to the Royal College of Midwives, the removal of NHS bursaries means that

“Women with children and those who already have a first degree will be particularly hit hard…many of these women already make up a large proportion of our current midwifery student base.”

Many students take up healthcare studies as a second degree course. Already saddled with repayments of undergraduate debt, they are hardly likely to be enthusiastic about the prospect of taking on an additional debt of £51,600. The starting salary for nurses is only £21,692, and replacing NHS bursaries with loans will mean an average pay cut of more than £900 a year for a nurse, midwife or allied health professional, given current salary levels. We know that debt particularly deters poorer students, single parents and BME students—those who are more likely to be found entering nursing and midwifery.

I think that the people who can best explain what the Government’s decision will mean are those who will be most directly affected. The Royal College of Nursing has collected their testimonial in a huge blue book, which I commend to the Minister.

Let me end by returning to that packed room in Cambridge, and give some of those students a voice. Sarah from Cambridge says:

“I would not have survived without my bursary. The nurse’s salary is poor and to have debt on top is terrible.”

Amanda says:

“I am an adult learner with a husband and two children. I had my children young so was unable to fulfil a degree at the usual time…If I was to have a mountain of debt at the end it would not have been worth my while! I fear it will put off adult learners entering into the degree programme, which will mean the NHS losing out on valuable, decent people who would make fantastic nurses!”

Maria says:

“By stopping the bursary we are in danger of preventing mature students from entering training as those who already have financial commitments will struggle. This will mean that the NHS loses the chance of recruiting a great resource of potential nurses.”
Another Sarah says:

“I am really disappointed by this change, and nursing is not like any other profession so should be treated uniquely. It is really tough being a nursing student and I think that the proposed bursary changes should be considered carefully to respect the work, commitment and enthusiasm of student nurses.”

She puts it very well. If the Government will not listen to me, perhaps they will at least listen to her.

4.2 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): This has been a high-quality and comprehensive debate. I have to say that I have a small amount of sympathy for the Minister for Community and Social Care, because, as we all know, this policy was not devised in his Department, but hastily put together on the back of a fog packet somewhere in the Treasury following the Chancellor’s £2 billion raid on the Department of Health budget. It looks very much like a case of “Cut first and ask questions later.” I say that because in just two lines of the autumn statement, with no consultation and no evidence base, the Government have committed themselves to a huge gamble with the future of the NHS workforce and with patient safety.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) for leading the campaign with his early-day motion. His record in this area is unparalleled. He explained expertly why many student nurses are in a different position from that of other students, and expressed the concern that he and many other Members feel about the deterrent effect that the Government’s proposals will have on future numbers. Other Members spoke in similar vein, including my hon. Friend the Members for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) and for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher), as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), who pressed the Minister on what estimate had been made of the number of students that would be written off. He did not receive a reply; I trust that the Minister for Community and Social Care will be able to fill in the details.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), who came to this place with a strong reputation as a health campaigner, spoke with great authority about the pitfalls of the proposals. My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who also has great experience in this area, asked a very pertinent question about the capacity of the health service to take on the extra students. The Chairman of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), made an important contribution, and I hope that the Minister will respond directly to some of the very real concerns that she raised.

The Government are presiding over the worst A&E figures since records began, the biggest financial crisis in the history of the NHS—three quarters of trusts are now in deficit—and a crisis in morale across the workforce, with a Secretary of State too belligerent to listen. They have already alienated a generation of junior doctors, and now they risk doing the same for our future nurses and midwives, as well as many other health professionals.

Why are they looking to unsettle a huge section of our NHS workforce at a time when good will is more important than ever?

We have several concerns about this policy, many of which hon. Members have aired today and to which the Government are yet to give any credible answer. First, let us look at the actual problem the proposals are trying to address—not the black hole created by the Chancellor but the shortage of nurses in the NHS. Be in no doubt, the Government are entirely responsible for that shortage, because they decided to reduce the number of nurse training places. Had they maintained the level set by the last Labour Government, 8,000 more nurses would have been trained in the last Parliament alone. When we hear, therefore, about spiralling agency costs and staffing shortages, let us remember the cause—not the nurses, the trusts or the patients, but the Government’s chronic mishandling of the NHS.

The proposal, with all its risk and uncertainty, will, in the Government’s most optimistic scenario, deliver 10,000 more nurses, midwives and other health professionals. When they say the proposal could deliver up to 10,000 more staff, they really are looking at the glass half full. The figure comes with so many caveats that, if it were a used car, I would not even take it for a test drive. The Government’s own equality assessment acknowledges that there could be an adverse impact on parents and carers and that childcare costs could have a significant influence on participation. It is worth picking up a few quotes from their impact analysis and evidence document, to get a flavour of just how flaky the proposal is. It says that the “precise impact is difficult to estimate with certainty”, that “behavioural change is uncertain”, that “there may be some uncertainty over applications in the very short term” and—my favourite—that there “is no robust set of information to make this assessment.”

In other words, the Government are saying they have done an assessment but have absolutely no idea what the impact of the policy will be. If that does not amount to a huge gamble, I do not know what does.

If the Government will not take heed of their own assessments, they might listen to the Royal College of Nursing, which has said that “there is a risk of people being put off from applying to nursing degrees, because of concerns over debt.”

It, like many Members, is particularly concerned about the impact on mature students. As we have heard, the average age of a student nurse is 28. The RCN has said: “There is a worrying lack of assessment of the potential for the changes to act as a disincentive for some students, such as mature students or those from lower income backgrounds.”

Research by the trade union Unison shows that nine out of 10 student nurses surveyed said they would not have gone into training had the new proposals been in place. That is not a trivial number. If the numbers put off turned out to be even half that, the implications for the NHS would be catastrophic. So where is the evidence to reassure us that it will not happen? There is not any. The Minister prays in aid the experience across the general higher education sector, but he knows that he is not comparing like with like. The evidence from the mature student experience does not support his case. In fact, the Higher Education Statistics Agency says that between 2011 and 2015 the number of mature students fell by 17%.

Let us be clear about what the policy really means for nurses. Owing to the Government’s reprehensible decision to freeze the student loan repayment threshold at £21,000
from 2017, all future nurses are facing a real-terms pay cut. According to Unison, based on current salaries, the average nurse, midwife or allied health professional will lose over £900 a year to meet their debt repayments. Staff retention is a huge issue across the NHS, including in nursing, and as the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) rightly pointed out, the Government’s record is poor. Saddling nurses with extra debt will only make the matter worse.

David Morris: I did not say that the Government’s record was poor; I pointed out that we needed reform, which is what we are here to discuss. I am disappointed in the hon. Gentleman’s approach, because we have had a very constructive debate today.

Justin Madders: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. If he is stating the facts, then I interpret them as being a poor record for the Government; that is more about the facts than about the way in which he presented them.

Let us be clear: we are talking about a debt that nurses are never likely to pay off. They will graduate with debts of between £50,000 and £60,000. Many of the mature students who take nursing as a second degree will find themselves with more than £100,000 of debt. Let me repeat that figure so that it sinks in: our country is looking down the barrel of a policy that will saddle nurses with a six-figure debt. They are not bankers or lawyers; the people who keep the NHS going will be earning just a fraction of what they earn. We already have the highest level of student debt in the English-speaking world, which is not a record we should be proud of, and these proposals will only make matters worse.

It would be an error to put nurses into the same category as other students, but I think that the Government are making that error. Student nurses’ courses take up much more of the year, meaning that they have much less opportunity than other students to work while they study. They are also required to spend 50% of their time working with patients in clinical practice, including on evening and weekend shifts. That requires a real commitment of at least 2,300 hours over the length of their course, during which they do difficult jobs at unsocial times. Now the Government are asking them to pay for the privilege of doing that. This policy is like a very constructive debate today.

The Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of Podiatry and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists are all respected institutions with years of experience and a wealth of knowledge in this area, but not one of them was asked to make a formal input into this policy before it was announced. Contrary to what the Minister has said today. When he was asked, in a Westminster Hall debate on 11 January, who he had consulted, he said:

“There has been consultation with leading nursing professionals.”—[Official Report, 11 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 237WH.]

He said nothing about the royal colleges. I hope that we shall be able to clear this up. I ask him to tell us exactly who he did consult, and to place in the Library a copy of the advice that he received following the consultation.

Let us not pretend, now that the consultation has been published, that it is a meaningful consultation on the principle or the detail of the proposals. It simply asks a few technical questions on how to implement the changes. You can have any colour you want as long as it is black. It is frankly an insult to the public, to patients and to the profession. The Government should withdraw this proposal and instead commit to a full consultation on how to improve the support available to student nurses, how to increase the number of nurses in the NHS and how to improve retention. I urge all Members who genuinely care about the future of our health service, who have concerns about the potential deterrent effect of these proposals, and who are not prepared to gamble recklessly with our nurses, to join us in the Lobby today and send a clear message to the Government that it is time to think again. I commend the motion to the House.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Pick that one out of the back of the net!

4.14 pm

The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): And where has the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) been during the debate? [Interruption.] Oh, I beg your pardon, but that is not as good as being here in on the Floor of the Chamber in real life.

Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity to respond to the debate. I thank the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) for raising the important question of the development and expansion of nurse training in England. I thank colleagues for a
good debate, with discussions informed by those with close connections with the NHS, either personally or through family.

I pay tribute to all those who work and train in hospitals, who fill the posts that we have been speaking about, and who are the subject of our debate. They are not only nurses and midwives; several colleagues made specific references to allied health professionals, such as those in dietetics, occupational therapy, orthotics and prosthetics, physiotherapy, podiatry and chiropody, radiography, speech and language therapy, operating department practice, dental hygiene and dental therapy—all important components of the NHS. We recognise the importance of the work done in our hospitals, and we thank them for their effort.

This has been a not unusual debate in which the Government propose changing something and the Opposition react with horror. Whether the Government’s arguments are good or bad, that is how it goes. There have been a variety of Opposition arguments—some good, some less good—but whenever change is proposed, there is a set of reactions. As for the poorest reaction, I say this to the hon. Member for Lewisham East with great sincerity: please do not go down the class route. It was absolutely unnecessary to try to pick out what people might have heard in various places as they were growing up and graduating. I am the son of a doctor and a teacher, so there were public health workers in my household. The sense that I got of public service and commitment was possibly shaped then. I do not think that the experience was any different from that of the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), who had a private education at Haberdashers’ Aske’s School for Girls. I see no evidence in the hon. Lady’s obvious commitment to mental health and everything else that her conversations shaped her poorly in any way. To suggest that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich, is undertaking, and he is keeping a close ear on those consultations.

The two main arguments presented today against what we are trying to do have been about deterrents, or the idea that the occupations are somehow unpalatable and that people will not go into them. On deterrents, I am old enough to have been here for the original debates on the introduction of student fees. Everyone protesting against them at the time said that no one would ever go to university again, and that people from poor backgrounds would never go to university. The same arguments come up every time the subject is raised, and the same arguments have been proved false time and again. What is not false is the damage done at the time of the debates when it is suggested to those who want to aspire to higher education, and to take themselves in a different direction, that it will somehow be made impossible, and that they should not want to do it. Those arguments have been used time and again, and they have been used again today. They were wrong then; they are wrong now.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What is unique about this situation, as has been mentioned several times, is that a disproportionate number of the nurses using the bursary scheme enter as mature students, including three of my nieces. If bursaries were not available to them, they would not have gone on to train as excellent nurses.

Alistair Burt: If the hon. Lady had been here for the entire debate, she would have heard people speak about the problems of hardship following bursaries; that was referred to by the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and by Government Members. People want access to more funds, which might help those whom the hon. Lady just mentioned, but the assumption is that, because it will be a student loan and because it is a change, people just will not want to do the courses. There is no evidence to suggest that that is correct. Using it as a scare story is unhelpful for the recruitment that we want.

Nic Dakin: Does the Minister accept that the royal colleges and others are genuinely anxious about the proposals? If he does, will he commit to engaging with them as fully as possible?

Alistair Burt: That is a good question. Yes, of course. At a time of change, there is a degree of uncertainty. My main point is about how the matter has been blown up yet again, as it was for student loans originally. The idea that people would be deterred from ever going to university, and that no one would go from disadvantaged backgrounds, has been proved false. Of course, the concerns are very much being addressed by the consultation that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich, is undertaking, and he is listening extremely carefully. The consultation process is very wide and genuine, and he is listening particularly to ideas on alterations and proposals. The consultations are not complete and the scheme is not complete, and he is keeping a close ear on those consultations.

There is recognition that there are different characteristics for those who go into nursing, midwifery and allied health professions, which is why we want to make sure that appropriate support is available. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills student support regulations give more support than the bursary; the Secretary of State retains the power to give discretionary funding in exceptional cases; and in the consultation, respondents can give examples of unique characteristics, so that the reforms can reflect that. Our position recognises that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) said, more of the same will not do the job. The need for change is there. We need more nurses, and we need more nurses domestically trained. We are going to do something different, recognising what changes there might be. That is why we have the consultation. Unique characteristics will be reflected in it; that is what the consultation is about. Keeping the current system is not working and will not work in the future. That is why we need change.

Paula Sherriff: My local Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust is, by its own admission, in the midst of a nursing crisis, with about half the wards staffed at below the minimum staffing level for nurses. Does the Minister think these proposals will help or hinder that?

Alistair Burt: I say in all honesty to the hon. Lady, who is knowledgeable about health matters and has been to see both me and the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich,
that the proposals help. At the moment, the problem with nurse training in this country is that it is limited. The universities cannot take all the people who want to be nurses; they have to turn them away—37,000 of them. This scheme opens up the opportunity for more people to train, and for more people to come into nursing through the nursing associates route. If the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) is looking for a straight answer on whether this will provide more nurses and help her local hospital, I can say: yes, it will. That is why these proposals are being made.

I wish to set out briefly the details of the basis for the reforms, just for those who were not able to attend the whole debate, and then answer one or two questions that were raised. To deliver more nurses, midwives and allied health professionals for the NHS, a better funding system for health students in England and a sustainable model for universities, we need to move nursing, midwifery and allied health students from grants and bursaries on to the standard student loans system. Putting more funding into the existing system was not a sensible or viable option for the Government, if we are also to increase the number of student places, live within our budget, and ensure that the NHS can use the extra £10 billion-worth of additional investment for front-line care by the end of the Parliament.

The subjects that we are talking about are extremely popular with students. In 2014, nursing registered as the fifth most popular subject on UCAS, and in that year there were 57,000 applicants for 20,000 nursing places. Rather than denying thousands of applicants a place to study health subjects at university, surely it is better that the new proposals ensure enough health professionals for the NHS, while cutting the current reliance on expensive agency and overseas staff, and giving more applicants the chance to become a health professional. Part of the reason why we need to modernise the funding system is that student nurses, midwives and allied health students currently have access to less money through the NHS bursary than students using the student loan system do. Under a move to the loan system, these health students will receive an increase of about 25% in the financial resources available to them for living costs during the time they are at university.

It is not possible to pick out all the speeches made today, but I would like to make reference to some. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) discussed issues affecting postgraduate students, which are important. The majority of healthcare students undertaking these courses will be able to access a BIS postgraduate masters loan, although we acknowledge in the consultation that some courses currently fall outside the BIS postgraduate loan package. We are working with BIS and the Treasury on their higher education and lifelong learning review, and we will address these matters in the Government’s response to the consultation, so she is right to raise that issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), the Chair of the Health Committee, said straightforwardly that we need to train more nurses. That is our bottom line; it is what we are trying to do. On transition, she said that it was important to listen to needs, and she spoke about getting more professionals away from the acute sector and into primary care. As she knows, that is a major interest of this Government, and these proposals will help in that regard.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) was straightforward. He talked about his trust recruiting from abroad, but said that it would like to recruit more at home. It will be able to do so under these proposals.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) talked about what he discovered when he spoke to his local university and trust. He discussed the morality of taking more nurses, and student nurses, from overseas. It is important to recognise that our proposal will ease that situation to some degree. He also spoke about the important issue of the Ministers’ dilemma: of whether to put money into training now, knowing that the benefit will come some years later. It is important for any Government to recognise that more money must go into the training of doctors and of the people about whom we are talking today. There will be a return later.

I am conscious of time, and I am sorry that I cannot cover more speeches. Let me say this: the NHS never sleeps or stays still. As our country changes, so does the NHS; it must. It is always comforting to resist change, even when the status quo is not good enough; however, the need for innovation, which will be challenging and resisted, is imperative. This Government have given the NHS that commitment, and we will promote the finance, planning and innovation that were denied by the Opposition. We will not allow so many people to be denied the opportunity of becoming a nurse. We will not allow those on hardship funds and bursaries to fail to get access to more finance. We will not allow them to be—

Mr Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith. That the Question be now put. Question agreed to. Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 158, Noes 277.

Division No. 263] [4.26 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Anderson, Mr David
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carwell, Mr Douglas
Chapman, Douglas
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cox, Jo
Crausby, Mr David
Creasy, Stella
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic

Noes

[4.26 pm

Alistair Burt]
239 240
4 MAY 2016

NOES

Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard

Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, Mr Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cameron, rh Mr David
Carmichael, Neil
Cartilage, James
Cash, Sir William
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Sir Kenneth
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dobson, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyly-Price, Jack
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fyoh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger

Garrier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halden, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, Mr John
Headland, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hollingbery, George
Hollinsrike, Kevin
Hollowbone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kacwczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lan caster, Mark
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Question accordingly negatived.
Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Robert Neill: I will give way once more—to someone from outside London.

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend perhaps anticipates the point I am going to make as the Member who represents South East Cambridgeshire. Of course London has enjoyed great success, but is it not only right that other areas—areas that have been underfunded for years—should benefit from the opportunity to enjoy the same success so that they can be brought up to the level that London has enjoyed?

Robert Neill: That is part of the point about levelling up that was made by the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan).

The other two things I would observe are these. I mentioned that London is not homogeneous. The levels of funding in outer-London boroughs such as mine, Bromley, and in others, such as Richmond upon Thames and Kingston upon Thames, are actually often much lower than those that are Headlined in respect of inner-London boroughs. Boroughs such as mine have levels of funding that are scarcely different from those in the shire counties around us.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): As one of the Members of Parliament representing Kingston upon Thames, may I ask my hon. Friend whether he agrees that it cannot be right that my borough gets less than £5,000 per pupil, while other boroughs in London get more than £7,000 per pupil?

Robert Neill: That is the point we need to address.

Several hon. Members rose—

Robert Neill: I will make a little progress and then I will take some more interventions, because it is worth setting one other point in context.

Historically, London has had higher levels of funding, but, as I said, that does not apply to every borough. There is also a reason for that funding.

Several hon. Members rose—

Robert Neill: I am just going to make this point before I start giving way again—otherwise I will not make a coherent argument at all. There is a reason for that funding, which is that London has, on many levels, greater challenges. There are far more children with English as a second language. There are higher levels of deprivation on almost any indices. There is great wealth, but there is also great deprivation, and those are closely—geographically and physically—juxtaposed. On any view, there are also extra costs involved in being a teacher or in running a school in London. The capital cost of sites is more because the land values are much higher. The cost of housing also means that teachers’ wages have to be higher. It is not illegitimate for those things to be reflected in the formula. London as a city is also the UK’s principal economic driver and puts in more to the UK economy than it takes out, so in that respect we are already subsidising the rest of the UK.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and on the manner in which he has approached it. I agree with almost everything he has said. I come from an outer-London borough officially, but we have inner-London needs, and that is not reflected in the funding we receive from central Government. Does my hon. Friend—sorry, the hon. Gentleman—agree that we must make sure that funding is commensurate to the needs of the children in an area?

Robert Neill: The hon. Lady is almost an hon. Friend when West Ham are playing on Saturdays, and we hope for a good end to the season. She is right, and that brings me to the second point about funding. First, some outer-London boroughs are no better funded than shire counties anyway, yet in London there are much greater costs than in the rest of the country; and secondly, there is an artificial distinction in how funding in London is split up between inner and outer London. If justice is to be done in a formula, we need to move away from that distinction, which is purely historical. It goes back to the creation of the Greater London Council in 1963, when the then Inner London Education Authority was in fact part of the old London County Council, which had been a county education authority, while the outer-London boroughs had been educational authorities in their own right, either as parts of counties or as county boroughs. The historical anomaly that the hon. Lady mentions is the fact that her local authority is an amalgamation of two county boroughs that are part of the east end but were not in a county of London, so are treated as being in outer London, whereas Wandsworth, for example, which, in many respects, is much more prosperous, is an inner-London borough. That is a wholly illogical and unsustainable distinction that we need to break down because it distorts the arrangements.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): My hon. Friend is right. The funding system we have today, handed over from the previous Labour Government, is broken in London and in urban and rural areas alike, and needs to be fixed. On additional costs in London, no proposal that I have seen from anyone, including F40, suggests anything other than that London would continue to have significantly more money per head than other areas.

Robert Neill: I am grateful for that point, and I accept it. Provided that we get that built in, this need not be an argument, but rather a question of making sure that any formula reflects the diversity of needs that exists within London.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I give way to the right hon. Lady, who is very well regarded in London for all her work.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I thank the hon. Gentleman and congratulate him on securing this debate. He talked about some of the factors that impact on the differential costs in London and elsewhere. Does he agree that the mobility of families in London is another factor? Two primary schools in my constituency have a 30% turnover every year, meaning that every teacher has to teach 40 children a year. The additional costs of getting to know, assessing and then responding to those needs ought to be had regard to in setting the formula if it is to be fair for every child in the country.
Robert Neill: I entirely agree with the right hon. Lady. I say to the Government that I hope that this could be reflected in the formula without causing any damage to the overall principle. That is for the very good reason that because inner-London boroughs are geographically so small, and part of one single housing market and one single jobs market, people will very frequently move across them. In my constituency, one can move a quarter of a mile or half a mile down the road and be in one of two other London boroughs. London boroughs experience much more cross-border mobility than in a shire county where one could move 20 or 30 miles and still be within the same county. I would urge that that matter could fairly be taken into account.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his remarks. The right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) mentioned turbulence as a reason for funding certain schools, particularly in London. Does my hon. Friend agree that London is not the only place where turbulence is suffered, and that the pupil premium that the Government rightly introduced to allow for the fact that service families move all the time is germane to this debate and needs to be reflected in the funding formula?

Robert Neill: I supported the introduction of the pupil premium, as did my hon. Friend. It is worth stressing that although turbulence occurs in other places, it is particularly acute in London owing to the size of its population and the churn of its population as a whole, with people moving in and out of London, and people moving within London, and therefore families and children moving and London authorities having to cope with far more cross-borough placements than other areas. That issue, together with the artificial distinction I mentioned, could be sensibly incorporated into the formula to reflect the position in London.

Many other hon. Members want to speak and I do not want to deny them the opportunity, but I just want to touch on a few other matters. We have discussed the two key issues, namely the churn and mobility and the inner-outer distinction, which is out of date. There is also pressure on how the question of deprivation is measured. It is currently done by postcode, but there can be massive extremes of wealth and poverty within some London borough postcodes. That is very apparent in some places in docklands.

Victoria Borwick (Kensington) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and absolutely concur with what he has said about deprivation. Kensington still has two of the most deprived areas in all of Britain, so nobody should think that it is paved with gold. We also have some outstanding schools. We have run through the initial proposals and—I hope that the Minister will take cognisance of this—it is calculated that 28 of our 33 schools will face a significant funding reduction should the proposals be implemented in full, with some outstanding schools set to lose 10% of their budget. I thank my hon. Friend for drawing the issue to our attention.

Robert Neill: There are pressures and they are only going to grow, given that the London pupil population is going to increase significantly: the year-on-year growth rate is 3%. That needs to be funded. London also faces particularly high pressures in relation to special educational needs provision. The Department does not provide the capital funding for special educational needs and disability provision, which is an issue for areas with higher land values than those elsewhere in the country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Robert Neill: I have been generous and I really do need to move on.

There are other issues that do not relate directly to the national funding formula, but they could correct one or two anomalies in how dedicated school grants work. The Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), has already been helpful and met representatives of my local authority and others to try to iron out the rigidities. It is not possible, for example, to spend money on SEND transport, which seems anomalous given that it is integrally linked to the provision of the schools themselves. There are similar issues with psychological services. If the consultation picks up on such things around the margins, that would greatly assist London boroughs, many of which run a pretty tight and efficient ship.

Councillor David Simmonds, the deputy leader of Hillingdon Council and chair of the Local Government Association’s children and young people board, is well known to Ministers. He has said:

“Probably the biggest risk lies in the underfunding of the High Needs Block which will remain with councils. I am concerned that there is an implicit assumption that councils will bail out the underfunding through recourse to council-tax payers, which is a major departure from the principle that underpins the Dedicated Schools Grant that education funding is ring-fenced.”

That is a fair point. I hope that the Government will take it on board and find a means of removing what I am sure would have been an unintended consequence of an insufficiently flexible formula.

My final point comes from two headteachers in my constituency. I took the liberty of asking them about their experience. The headteacher of a very efficient and highly rated primary school near where I live says that they “already manage…on a very tight budget. I can confidently claim that without the very generous support of our Parent Teacher Association we would not be in a position to afford many of the resources that make our schools run so effectively—such as computing technology, sports coaches and even basics like exercise books.”

She refers to housing costs and the “tendency for excellent young teachers to move away”.

This small school is doing all the right things. I can confidently claim that without the very generous support of our Parent Teacher Association we would not be in a position to afford many of the resources that make our schools run so effectively—such as computing technology, sports coaches and even basics like exercise books.”

She goes on to mention having some flexibility on the availability of schools forums, where they are still useful. She also reiterates the arbitrary distinction whereby she pays teachers from outer-London funding, while in Lewisham and Greenwich, which is a quarter of a mile
up the road and where the demographic is no different, the situation is different because there happens to be a line on a map. That needs to be addressed by a sensible funding formula.

That is a helpful summary from people at the coalface. I will not trespass on the House's time anymore, because I know that a number of London Members of all parties want to bring their own perspective to the debate, but I hope I have flagged up the key issues. I am grateful for the chance to do so.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I suggest that Members take about 10 minutes, so that everybody gets equal time?

4.55 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) for securing this debate on such an important issue, and I pay tribute to him for his work with the all-party group on London.

As the hon. Gentleman said, there are concerns that changes to the national funding formula will have a massive negative impact on London schools and their pupils. Despite the Government’s hollow promises of ring-fenced education funding, the Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that London schools already face an 8% real-terms reduction in funding over the next five years. Now it looks likely that they will face a further cut of £260 million a year due to the changes to the national funding formula. The Minister has said in the past that that is not the case, and I hope he will take his work with the all-party group on London.

As the hon. Gentleman said, there are concerns that changes to the national funding formula will have a massive negative impact on London schools and their pupils. Despite the Government’s hollow promises of ring-fenced education funding, the Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that London schools already face an 8% real-terms reduction in funding over the next five years. Now it looks likely that they will face a further cut of £260 million a year due to the changes to the national funding formula. The Minister has said in the past that that is not the case, and I hope he will take his work with the all-party group on London.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Does not the funding formula also drive perverse outcomes as between schools within the same local authority? Westminster Council has advised me that 20 schools will lose up to 14% of their grant because of how the funding formula works. Perversely, some of the schools with the highest levels of deprivation will lose the most and some of the schools with the least deprivation will be gainers. The problem with how the funding formula works is not just between local authorities but between schools.

Rushanara Ali: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend, and I hope the Minister listened carefully to her powerful insights about what will happen both within and across local authorities. It will be schoolchildren who suffer, and the improvements in performance in London schools will be put at risk. That improvement is the envy of the world, with many studies showing how London has progressed. It has taken a generation to achieve that, and I hope the Minister will recognise the concerns being expressed today and the dangers of the changes, which risk having a negative effect on the performance of London schools.

I want to highlight some of the challenges that exist and the backpack against which London has transformed its schools. As I said, that has taken a generation, and the danger is that the change will set us back in a very short time. London faces some of the highest child poverty levels in the country, and, as the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst pointed out, the highest inequality. The extremely high cost of living, and especially of housing, has a detrimental effect on teachers’ ability to find accommodation.

Despite those challenges, local education authorities across parties—Labour councils as well as Conservative councils—have worked tirelessly to improve education in London. As a result, nine out of 10 schools are good or outstanding. I hope the Minister will think carefully about the impact of the reforms on that progress. If we are not careful, we will set schools in London back.

Other regions see London as an exemplar. People point to the London Challenge, which the last Labour Government introduced, and which was supported by people across parties and recognised for its achievements. Other regions have tried to emulate it. It is really important that we build on the successes of our regions rather than pit them against one other, which I fear will happen as a result of the changes. It is wrong to put educationists in competition with each other for the right reasons. We should be looking at how to improve the achievement of all our children, across the country.

Graham Stuart: It is worth saying that it is important to have a fair system across the country. Certain parts of London—and it is only parts—have disproportionately benefited. A Lambeth school can have more than £1,500 a head more—for a class of 30, that is £45,000 more—than a school half a mile away in Croydon. We have a broken system, and we need to fix it.

Rushanara Ali: We have very good results in London. Nine out of 10 schools across London are good or outstanding. We should build on that, not pit schools against one another. The hon. Gentleman served on the Education Committee so should know better than to make that argument.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I was not going to intervene again, but I have to on the back of that. In its manifesto, the Conservative party said:

“Under a future Conservative Government, the amount of money following your child into school will be protected.”

Does my hon. Friend agree that changing the formula to take money away from some children is not the right way to meet a manifesto commitment?

Rushanara Ali: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. It would be yet another broken promise. I hope that the Minister will listen carefully today and make sure that that promise is not broken.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Has my hon. Friend seen the estimate which states that if the F40 proposals were implemented as tabled by the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) and others, the most prosperous 30 authorities in the country would gain more than £200 million and the least prosperous would lose more than £200 million?

Rushanara Ali: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. That is exactly what schoolteachers are concerned about. That cannot happen. It goes to show that there is not a good motive behind this change. The Government should be ashamed of themselves, and the Minister should take action.
Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point about the collective endeavour to improve standards of education for children in London. Does she share my concern that in Southwark that will be undermined if Southwark schools lose, as they risk doing, between 8% and 20% between now and 2019-20? Does she agree with the point made by our right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) that that is not protecting funding?

Rushanara Ali: I completely agree with my right hon. and learned Friend. I find it shocking that Ministers can make the argument that they are protecting budgets when these changes mean quite the opposite and will devastate schools in London. I appeal to the Government to look at how to build on the achievements in cities such as London, rather than setting them against other regions. That is deeply unhelpful to our educationists, who work tirelessly to make sure that schools do well.

I will set out the specific example of my constituency, to highlight to the Minister just how the investment in schools in London has transformed education. Under the last Labour Government, schools in Tower Hamlets rose from the bottom of the national league tables, where they were in the 1990s, to being some of the country’s best. That happened against a backdrop of two out of three young people being eligible for free school meals, more than 75% of pupils having English as a second language, and some of the highest levels of child poverty in the country. Tower Hamlets is now in the top third of the national league tables, in a city that, as I mentioned earlier, has the highest percentage of schools that are good or outstanding.

We cannot afford to be complacent, however. Despite the achievements in London, including in boroughs such as mine, 40% of London’s pupils leave school without good GCSEs. Any funding reduction could put further improvements at risk. We need to build on our achievements and make sure that that 40% can leave the education system with good results. That is what the Government should focus on, rather than on potentially decimating success through cutting funding in London.

As has been pointed out, funding is connected with recruitment, and London faces increasing recruitment challenges because of the cost of living crisis. When an average of 75% of the schools budget is allocated to staff costs, these changes could mean more than 6,000 fewer teachers in London’s schools.

James Berry: Does the hon. Lady accept that the increase in house prices in outer London as well as inner London means that the difficulty in recruiting teachers affects the whole of London? The distinction between inner and outer London is no longer a good one, given the increase in house prices across the city as a whole.

Rushanara Ali: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that in boroughs such as mine and in Newham and Hackney, the unprecedented rise in house prices has been much greater than in outer London. I accept his point that house prices are a major issue, but the Government should be considering how to address that across London and the country, rather than dividing communities and areas. That is our point. We must build on our achievements and not close our ears to each other, because that does not serve our constituents or young people well.

Let me turn to population growth in London. When the population is growing by 100,000 a year in London, we cannot afford to have fewer teachers. If we are already looking at 6,000 fewer teachers with these cuts, imagine what will happen in the future. We need to plan ahead for the needs of cities such as London. If we want London to remain a world-class city with some of the best educated young people in the country, and help other areas to improve and replicate what we are achieving, we must ensure that we do not throw away that success.

Lucy Frazer: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rushanara Ali: I will continue my remarks because other Members wish to speak and I have given way a number of times. Perhaps the hon. and learned Lady will also have the chance to speak.

As has been mentioned, the increased cost of living in London has meant that teachers find it increasingly difficult to survive on their current salaries, and they require the London weighting equivalent to enable them to live and work in London. Already in boroughs such as mine and elsewhere, local authorities are struggling to maintain teacher numbers, and with these cuts they will have to lay teachers off, which is not what local schools need.

In boroughs such as Tower Hamlets, Hackney and elsewhere, we have seen such as collaboration, partnership and the effective use of resources by teachers and local education authorities have helped to create a success story that has transformed our schools. We must build on that model. It is not about the academisation of schools in my borough—we did not have academies; it is the collaborative model and partnership, along with well-targeted resources into schools, investment in training, and support to teachers, that transforms schools in my constituency and elsewhere. That is well recognised around the country. Recent reports by the Brookings Institution and the Institute of Education highlight what it took to transform education, and spending resources effectively was critical to that.

My plea to the Minister is that he take back these plans, consider the formula again, and ensure that funding is targeted on those who need it. In London, given the inequality and deprivation, it is vital that we maintain that support. The Government should be looking at levelling up support to schools across the country, not taking resources away and punishing schools for doing well. It has taken a generation to transform schools such as those in my borough and across London, but it will take a matter of years—perhaps even less—if this funding formula is introduced and resources are taken away from schools, to decimate our education system. Surely the Minister will appreciate that it is far better to learn from one other and to build on our achievements rather than damage them.

5.9 pm

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) on leading it.
It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), although I must say from the outset that I did not agree with the tone of her speech. The Labour party is committed to the fair funding formula. The one we have now is broken and it is broken in London. I described the difference between Lambeth and Croydon, but we can find examples all over London. Schools hundreds of yards apart have differences in funding of up to tens of thousands of pounds per classroom. The current system is completely broken and wrong, and it is wrong across the country. The biggest gainer from the F40 proposals would be Barnsley. Other major northern cities would be beneficiaries, too. If we created a fairer system, other northern cities would lose out, because what we have now is erratic, irrational and bears no examination.

I beg Opposition Members in particular not to use the language that the hon. Lady used. The Government did not itemise a single principle in the consultation with which she disagreed; she simply asserted that it was some sort of appalling assault on London to reverse the progress that has been made. Nothing could be further from the truth. There are limited resources: that is recognised by those on the Front Benches on both sides of the House.

Talk of levelling up is all very well, so long as the hon. Lady's party is committed to no such thing and neither is the Conservative party. Even if the budget for this broken inequitable system was increased, we would still have to sit down and seek to ensure that the needs of every single child, regardless of disability, race or geography, were met.

The hon. Lady was right to say that we should have a system based on needs. That is precisely what the Government have consulted on. Whatever they come up with will doubtless not be perfect—nothing ever is—but to question the motive, when the Government are setting out to introduce a fairer funding system with the support of Labour Front Benchers, is beneath the hon. Lady. To say that London education will be decimated is wrong. The reality is that we are asking for more resources for his local authority and less for others. Will he be frank enough to acknowledge that?

**Lucy Frazer:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point. We need fairness so that every child has an equal opportunity to get an education. Does he agree that many of the points made about London—growth, special needs, high house prices, a need to recruit and retain teachers—apply to other areas of the country, too? I cite by way of example Cambridge and its outer areas. Every one of those factors applies to us as it does to London.

**Graham Stuart:** My hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. We heard language about dividing communities. We have a broken system. If anyone would like to make the case that the current system is fair, reasonable and just, then please do so. But if it is not—and it is not—then we have to redistribute.

Making pernickety points about the manifesto, which says that the Government are going to protect the amount of money per child—which they are—[Interruption.] To the point where we cannot redistribute from someone who is grossly and unfairly funded in one place to another person somewhere else who is on the other end of the spectrum? That is ridiculous. Again, that is beneath the hon. Lady who brought the issue up and it is beneath other Labour Members—including the highly distinguished figure of the right hon. Gentleman, to whom I am happy to give way.

**Stephen Timms:** I think most people do not regard manifesto commitments as pernickety. The difficulty with the case the hon. Gentleman is making is that he is dressing it up in terms of principle. The reality is that he is asking for more resources for his local authority and less for others. Will he be frank enough to acknowledge that?

**Graham Stuart:** The right hon. Gentleman is incorrect. I want a fair system based on principle in which need is assessed, and where the money follows the pupil and that need. That is precisely what all of us should want.

Given that the Government have set out, in a transparent way, how to bring about this fairer funding formula, the suggestions that have been made are for political purposes; I know there are elections for London Mayor tomorrow. The House should rise above that. If the details come out and they are found not to fit with the principles, they will be worthy of criticism, but right now, such criticism cannot be made. When we have a badly broken system, the failure to demonstrate how it should be changed is not good enough.

What we should be talking about now is what emphasis we want to be placed on deprivation, for example, or population movements. Those things are all reflected in the proposed formula. The Government have touched on all of them. I do not see how it is acceptable to say, “We have a problem with a lot of people for whom English is a second language”, when that features in the formula. It is the same with deprivation needs in London—that, too, is in the proposed formula. The truth is that we have the ingredients for a fair system.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab) rose—

**Graham Stuart:** I give way to my extremely experienced and knowledgeable north-eastern colleague.

**Ian Mearns:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. There are many different facets to the differential funding around the country, and one of them is the historical choices of the relevant local authority. We used to have what was called the standard spending assessment, and some authorities chose to spend above the standard level. They funded the extra out of local taxation, which was built into the funding taken forward into the current distribution. It is one part of many facets, but it is a crucial part.

**Graham Stuart:** As ever, the hon. Gentleman makes an interesting and well-informed point. Westminster has been mentioned, so let us look at that as an example. People in very expensive properties are paying council tax rates that are absolutely on the floor; their rates
should be compared with those paid by my constituents living in homes worth a tiny fraction of the value of those in Westminster to see how much more those constituents are paying.

It does not wash to suggest that a fairer funding system is undermined because people paid more or less council tax in the distant past. The truth is that there are very high levels of council tax in many of the areas, including my own, that have the lowest funding, while there are very low levels of council tax in some of the richest and most prosperous parts of London. What we need is a system that is fair to all.

Ian Mearns rose—

Dame Angela Watkinson (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con) rose—

Graham Stuart: I give way to my hon. Friend.

Dame Angela Watkinson: Does my hon. Friend agree that property prices are an element in the formula that must be taken into consideration, particularly in areas such as the London Borough of Havering, which is right on the outside of outer London? Teachers there are paid the outer London allowance, but property prices are very high. Often newly qualified teachers who apply for jobs in our schools find that they cannot afford the accommodation, so they then move inwards towards Barking, Dagenham and other nearby boroughs where the properties are a bit cheaper.

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are all sorts of boroughs across London, and some areas are funded to the tune of tens of thousands of pounds less per classroom than one that might be just a short distance away, yet they are in exactly the same market for teachers—the vital ingredient for raising educational standards. Despite that, when it comes to improving standards, outer London has been part of the London educational transformation.

The suggestion that moving from a situation of gross inequity to one that is fairer to all will undermine quality, when those who have suffered that inequity, such as the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Dame Angela Watkinson), have none the less managed to improve standards, proves that the issue is not just about money. The money needs to be distributed fairly.

I think the most important thing we should do today as a House is to say that we want a system that is fair to all. We should be discussing the principles and ensuring that the Government do not wriggle on any them for their own partisan or other interests. That is quite right, but let us not scaremonger. Let us not send out messages about dividing communities when the aim of fair funding is right and supported by everyone—including the Labour, Conservative and other major Front-Bench teams. I shall end there.

5.19 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) on securing this important debate. I was delighted to co-sponsor it with him and several other hon. Members. I have been delighted, too, to co-chair with him the all-party parliamentary group for London. It is important to see London Members of different parties in the Chamber, making the case for London’s children in the expectation that the Government will listen and do the right thing by our capital’s children.

London’s schools have been transformed in recent years, particularly since the London Challenge, which was introduced by the Labour Government in 2003 and which pushed the performance of London’s children above the national average, where they have remained ever since. London’s students outperform their peers both in GCSEs and at key stage 2, and they have a higher performance rate in GCE maths and English than those in any other region in England. However, no one here—no one involved in education in London—considers that to be “job done”. We need to keep up the pressure in order to improve still further. In a globalised economy, London needs to compete with the best in the world, and that means no funding reductions that undermine our schools, heads, teachers, parents, governors and, above all, hard-working students.

The hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) said that it was pernickety to keep education promises. That is not pernickety; it is a matter of trust—the trust of the electors. To breach that trust, as the Government do time and again, is absolutely wrong. All schools deserve fair funding, and, as my hon. Friends have pointed out today, that means levelling funding up, not down. London Councils estimates that London’s schools could lose about £260 million a year from their budgets as a result of the Government’s proposed new funding formula, and some London boroughs are bracing themselves for a loss of up to 20% of funding at every school. Cuts on that scale would push education backwards in the capital.

To protect completely the funding for all the schools that stand to lose out, the Government would need to increase the block grant by £514 million a year. That would give all schools the resources to match the country’s best-performing schools. That is clearly a very significant amount of money, but it is a fraction of the cost of forcing 18,000 maintained schools to become academies, which, in some quarters, is estimated to be as much as £1.3 billion. That is surely a deranged proposal that would distract many of the best schools from providing excellent education and force them to focus, quite unnecessarily, on governance instead. More than 80% of those schools are already rated good or outstanding, so it beggars belief that the Government want to undermine their success by making unnecessary and dogmatic changes.

There is no need to penalise children in London in order to increase funding elsewhere. Spending on education cannot be seen as a sunk cost; it is an investment that gives young people a better chance in life, and boosts economic growth by providing a better-skilled workforce that benefits all of us.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): We are talking about a better chance in life and a more skilled workforce. I am sure that everyone in the Chamber will agree that children with special educational needs are often disadvantaged. We must make sure that their funding is maintained, if not increased, because real problems are starting to appear in the constituencies of Bromley and
Chislehurst, and of Beckenham—particularly in secondary schools such as the Langley Park schools, of which my own children, I have to declare, are a part.

Mr Reed: The hon. Gentleman has made an important point. I am glad that he raised it, and I would be astonished if anyone in the Chamber disagreed with him. He is right: we need to keep a particular eye on the support available to those children, because of their vulnerability, and because they have not always been supported properly and helped to achieve what they should have been helped to achieve.

I want to focus for a moment on the situation in Croydon. Our borough’s funding per pupil is £592 lower than the London average. We have the biggest shortfall in places in the country, and over the next five years the number of primary school pupils in Croydon is projected to grow at twice the London average. Croydon faces a huge demand for new primary school places that the Government cannot continue to ignore; they cannot exacerbate the problem by making funding changes that will further disadvantage children in our borough.

A particular problem that has already been mentioned is that teachers in inner-London boroughs can be paid up to £5,000 a year more than those in outer London. A school that is right on the border, as several in my constituency are, may find it hard to attract teachers who can earn so much more at another school just a few hundred yards away. That anomaly needs to be addressed in the new formula—and not, so that Ministers do not misunderstand me, by cutting pay in inner London.

The hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness asked why anyone would question the Government’s motives. One reason why parents in London fear for their schools is the way the Government implemented the transitional relief grant earlier this year. Under that scheme, intended to ease the pain of local government funding cuts, £300 million of funding was made available, but all the relief went to wealthier areas that had received the lowest level of cuts. Surrey got an extra £24 million to spend, while Croydon got a further £44 million of cuts. It was nothing more than naked party political gerrymandering. If that happens again with schools funding, London’s children will suffer.

London Councils, a cross-party organisation, estimates that 29 of London’s 33 boroughs are at risk of losing funding that is likely to be transferred to less deprived areas. Such a decision would be perverse. I hope that the new Mayor of London, who will be elected tomorrow—I hope very much it is my right hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan)—will join me and other London MPs in making powerful representations to Ministers to protect London’s schools and children. We will not allow the Government to undermine education in our capital city. Our children’s lives matter too much, and our economic future depends on their success. I urge Ministers to turn back and think again.

Stephen Timms: I am grateful to the Minister. The worry, however, is that up until now, the Department’s door has been open only to this particular group. The hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) champions F40. Nobody can object to representatives of that group of local authorities lobbying and promoting their own interests; it is worrying, though, that it has had this exclusive access up until now.

A version of the minutes of the September meeting with the F40 quoted an official from the Department offering to share “emerging proposals” with the F40 group “in confidence”. Proposals should not be shared in confidence with one particular set of authorities. I note that the minutes have now been altered, so they do not say that any more, but no such offer should ever have been made. My deep worry is that we are heading towards a woefully unbalanced proposal as a result of the privileged access given to that group.

I am grateful for the Minister’s reassurance about his door being open, but I want him to give us a commitment that when the numbers are put into the structure in the consultation document published in March, there will be the constraint that there should be no cuts in school funding for pupils in the most disadvantaged areas of the country.

As we have heard, my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) has pointed out that the Conservative manifesto certainly sounds as though it is saying that there will be no cuts for any individual students; I hope that that commitment will be maintained. I particularly want to press the Minister on this point: there should be no cuts to schools funding for pupils in the most disadvantaged areas. Indeed, the Government have recognised the need for additional schools funding for disadvantaged students through the pupil premium, so it would surely be quite perverse to slash the same funding through this formula.

As I mentioned earlier, if the F40 proposals were put straight into effect, it would result in the 30 most disadvantaged local authorities in the country losing £245 million per year and the 30 most affluent authorities in the country gaining more than £218 million per year. That would be a straightforward switch of hundreds of millions of pounds from the most disadvantaged authorities
to the most affluent ones. I hope that the Minister can reassure us that that kind of switch, as advocated by the F40 group—understandably; it is in the group’s interests to do so—will not happen.

My authority, the London Borough of Newham, made a freedom of information application for the Department’s modelling or analysis of the likely impact of the new formula. The request was refused. Officials said that they had the information, but its release was refused on the grounds that it related to the formulation or development of Government policy and was therefore exempt from freedom of information obligations. As I have said, however, there has clearly been a lot of access for representatives of the F40 authorities. The Minister has given us a commitment that his door will always be open, and I ask him release that information to the other authorities as well, so that everyone can see where we are heading. As things stand, some authorities have been taken into the Government’s confidence and others have not. Indeed, some of those others have been refused information relating to what has been going on. That information should be released.

A cursory glance at the F40 proposal published in 2013—it is on the F40 website—and at the consultation document published by the Government in March shows an uncanny resemblance between the two. Clearly, the F40 group has been very influential. I feel particularly strongly about this, because modelling suggests that my local authority will be among the biggest losers. Analysis of the F40 proposal shows that seven of the 10 biggest cash losers under the proposals will be in London, while none of the 10 biggest cash winners will be in the capital. That is the direction of the F40 group’s proposals. Of course it is advancing its own interests, but it should not have special access to Ministers in doing that. That is not a fair way for policy to be made.

I want to pick up on one point of detail that has already been touched on. The point was made in responding to the consultation document that the extent of pupil mobility in London has a big influence on school costs. Mobility has been used in school funding formulae up till now, but it is not used in the F40 proposal. Nor is it in the Government’s proposal. That is a very troubling omission. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst rightly underlined the point that high levels of mobility in London add significantly to the cost of running schools here, and that fact should be picked up in the formula.

Research published by the Fischer Family Trust this year estimates that a student who moves in-year will perform 10% less well than the average for their class, and that if three or more students join a class mid-year, they perform 10% less well than the average for their class, and that if three or more students join a class mid-year, attainment for the class as a whole will suffer by one to two percentage points. It estimates the combined cost of pupil mobility to schools and local authorities in London at £35 million a year. That should not be excluded from the formula, although the consultation document proposes excluding it. I understand that mobility is generally low excluding it. I understand that mobility is generally low, but the Department immediately put that into its version of the formula. Authorities such as mine, where mobility is high, will unfairly lose out on funding if that view prevails, so I hope that it does not.

I am worried that the process that has taken us to this point has been flawed, which is leading to an unfair proposal. I hope that the Minister will accept that schools funding for pupils in disadvantaged areas should not be cut as a result of the new formula, and that factors such as mobility, which have such a big impact in London, should be included in the formula, so that the damage is not inflicted on schools in London.

5.35 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) and my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on their excellent work with the all-party parliamentary group for London and on calling for this debate today.

The transformation of London’s schools has been remarkable. London now has the highest percentage of good or outstanding schools in the country. Let us compare that with the situation of 20 years ago, when there had been almost two decades of Tory cuts and a lack of national political leadership on education. I attended an excellent secondary school with brilliant teachers, but there were holes in the roof and often not enough books to go around. It was a national problem in the 1980s, but there were much more serious problems in London, where the desperate state of too many schools was driving population outflow from the capital and generations of children were failed.

The transformation was achieved through leadership on quality standards and investment in buildings, facilities and staff. Schools were given the resources to deliver, but there was a clear expectation from the Labour Government that poor standards, either in schools or in local education authorities, would not be tolerated. Many London councils also had a clear commitment to press hard on education standards. I am hugely proud of the schools in my constituency. I have met so many inspiring, hard-working teachers and see amazing things happening in our schools. There are too many examples to mention them all, but I think of Hill Mead Primary School, an outstanding school under the new inspection framework in the middle of the Moorlands estate in one of the most deprived wards in the whole country; the Gipsy Hill Federation of outstanding primary schools; The Elmgreen School, a parent-promoted secondary school that achieved its best ever GCSE results last year; The Charter School, an outstanding secondary school launched following a parent-led campaign that is now setting up a second school to meet demand; and Evelyn Grace Academy, where Labour’s investment enabled the employment of the late, great Zaha Hadid to build a school in Brixton that won the Stirling prize for architecture.

The funding formula has reflected both the additional costs that London schools have to bear over and above other parts of the country for building work, staffing, catering and a range of other issues, and the additional challenges faced in London, such as higher levels of deprivation, higher incidences of children with special educational needs, looked after children and pupils with English as a second language, and higher pupil mobility. There are also huge challenges around the need for new school places as London’s population expands. The Government’s funding formula proposals could result in London schools losing £260 million or more of funding, which is equivalent to almost 6,000 full-time
Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a delight to follow the excellent speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). We all seem to agree that there is no point in trying to compete on bleeding stumps and regions by saying, “My stump is more bleeding than yours.” We know that there are enormous issues in rural communities, seaside communities and across cities outside London. However, we are here to talk about London schools and how very proud we are of them. As others have given examples from their constituencies, may I say that Haringey schools are among the most improved in the country, particularly at GCSE level? We know that 43% of pupils on free school meals in Haringey achieved five A* to C grades at GCSE level in the 2014-15 academic year, which is significantly above the national average of 33.1%, and 50% of Haringey’s pupils are eligible for free school meals. Our ranking has gone up to 44th in the country from its position of 90th some years ago. The theme here is continuous improvement and the nub of the matter is that we do not want it to stop.

Ian Mearns: The point my hon. Friend is making exemplifies why we do not need any rounding down, anywhere across the country. We are getting real evidence that the right systems, the right approaches and the right innovation, backed by the right investment, can bring school improvement to every child in the country.

Catherine West: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point: it is about believing in every single child in our country, regardless of where they live, what language may be spoken at home or whatever other background they may have. On that point, may I mention the high number of students who have a particular educational need? I am sure that the excellent civil servants will have taken into account in their formula the fact that a lot of children face both language difficulties and other educational needs in London, and many of them come to our advice surgeries. There is nothing more tragic than hearing the stories of certain children who have had a difficult journey through school. I hope that that is reflected in the funding formula. We know that sustaining educational outcomes and improvements in all schools are essential across the piece, and that a reduction in funding would put all of that at risk. We spend a lot of time in this Chamber talking about the productivity puzzle, and we know that education is crucial to understanding why, in terms of our productivity, we as a nation are not doing as well as some of our comparative neighbours. Much of that comes down to our basic skills.

Let me provide one further example from my constituency—a Wood Green primary school. The Trinity Primary Academy required improvement the last time that Ofsted visited, but now 86% of its pupils achieve level 4 or above at key stage 2. I am so very proud of those children, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) is too, because many of them live in his constituency. When we go to the schools, we tell the children that we are very proud of them and that we talk about them all the time in this Chamber, and they seem to respond to that.
I will be brief, as I know that others wish to speak. Housing has been mentioned. We know that a deposit for a home in London is £91,000, which is far beyond the average starting wage of a teacher, which is between £20,000 and £30,000. We know that recruitment challenges are likely to be on the horizon, particularly for leadership and senior roles, both at a regional and a national level. The report “Building the Leadership Pool in London Schools”, which was published in November 2015, found that 58% of headteachers in London-based schools are considering leaving their role in the next three years and that 44% of governors in London schools are reporting difficulties in attracting good candidates for senior roles. We have all learned from the school improvement lessons of the past 20 years that school outcomes are very much down to the leadership in schools. I am talking about the wonderful outcomes, the wonderful school exam results and those wonderful smiles on the faces of children when we visit them in August, take photographs of them and praise them up to the heavens. It is a wonderful experience as an MP or an elected representative.

Finally, we have unique challenges in London. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) talked in detail about mobility, which we are very keen to see reflected in the funding formula. There is also English as an additional language, looked-after children, of whom there are many in London, the high levels of deprivation and the population growth. We know that, due to the wonderfully fertile families that we have in London—our baby boom—we have an 8.2% growth, compared with an overall reduction nationally of 0.2%. Although we delight in having a young city, it is a pressure that creates costs within the system and they should be reflected in the funding formula. Forecasts show that the pupil growth rate in London over the six years from 2012 is twice that of any other region and that, by 2017-18, pupil numbers in London are expected to have increased by 18%, which is considerable. There is also the mobility issue and teacher retention.

As we are coming to the end of the Session, may I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, all the very best for tomorrow and Friday?

5.48 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) for helping to secure the debate and for his excellent speech, which managed to define all the issues. It was a shame that the only other speech from the Government Benches was that of the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart). I cannot be as rude about his speech as I would like because he has left the Chamber, so I will limit myself to saying that he purported to be talking about fairness while, in fact, thanks to the sleuthing work of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), we found that he had not only a special interest but special access to the F40 group, which he leads. The long and the short of it is that this is about taking money away from very deprived areas and areas with high levels of need. I am not going to attack any other local authority and say that they do not have a need for education funding, but I resent people coming to the House under the guise of fairness saying that schools in my constituency, which are struggling, should lose a substantial proportion of their funds.

Let me begin by reading a short email I received a couple of weeks ago from a headteacher. I will not say from which school, although I think it will become clear as I read it out. It is a small, voluntary-aided, outstanding school. The email reads:

“Dear Andy, I would like to alert you to a meeting I will be hosting tonight and tomorrow morning for parents. I will be talking about the proposed cuts to our budget next year if the new national funding formula, which is out for consultation, gets the go ahead. It is likely that our school will suffer a 10% decrease in our budget, this coupled with a 9% decrease this year will leave us financially viable. I recognise that this is very short notice, but if you happen to be available either tonight at 6 pm, or tomorrow at 9.30 am, I think that both myself and our parents would appreciate your input.”

I managed to get along the next morning and found a substantial number of parents who wanted to talk about a number of issues, including the consultation. They were extremely well-informed. They wanted, first, to talk about places planning and the fact that we have in the borough some new free schools that are half empty while other community schools are oversubscribed. They particularly wanted to talk about the new policy of forced academisation and the problems that have occurred through that. These are not subjects that I raised during the meeting, but subjects that the parents raised and ideas they unanimously opposed.

The parents, and certainly the teachers, wanted to talk about recruitment. Any headteachers to whom I have spoken in my borough say that they are facing real problems in that regard. It is ridiculous, in terms of both need and demand, to compare London with other parts of the country, such as Cambridgeshire, as has happened. The average price of a property in my constituency is knocking £1 million. The Labour council, when it was elected, converted some of the luxury flats that the previous Conservative administration were building into key worker flats specifically for teachers, and it managed to retain some teachers as a consequence. For most teachers, it is impossible to afford to live in those boroughs, even on a good salary.

The email I quoted talked about ongoing cuts. The Government would have us believe that there are no ongoing cuts, but of course there are. Spending on education is frozen and schools are facing rising costs from pension contributions, national insurance contributions and teachers’ pay rises. These costs, before any changes to the funding formula, mean a total of £3 million of real-terms cuts to school budgets in the borough, which is the equivalent of 61 teachers. That has to be found for this financial year before any of the other changes come on stream.

Let us also remember what we are losing. This has already been mentioned, but London schools are doing brilliantly compared with what happened under previous Conservative Governments. In 2002, the percentage of pupils getting five A* to C grades at GCSE was 35%, and by 2013 it had almost doubled to 64%. For disadvantaged pupils, it had more than doubled, from 23% to 49%. That is what we are putting at risk with these politically motivated changes.

What will happen if further cuts of some 10% happen? Fewer subjects will be offered to children. Cuts will be made, which are already being flagged up, to mentoring support and to support staff and, perhaps, to teaching.
staff. Enrichment activities such as music, sport and drama have already been cut, and, as Members heard from the email I read out, some teachers, particularly in small schools, wonder whether their schools will remain viable at all. On the whole, these are outstanding, or at least good, schools. That is all being put at risk.

We have talked about English as an additional language, and 49% of pupils in London speak English as an additional language. That is the case in very few parts of the country. We have talked about mobility. There are primary schools in my borough of Hammersmith and Fulham where, over the life-cycle of the school, more than half the children in a particular class will change, with all the consequences mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham and others. I do not think there is a single school in my borough, and probably not in London, that could say it had a bit of slack, that it had money to spare and that it could provide that money.

I fear that the changes are being discussed in a cynical way and that the Government are shroud-waving. We are talking about 10% cuts on average and perhaps up to 20% cuts in some cases. When the second part of the consultation comes out, the cuts will be only 8% or 15%, and we will be told that the Government have done us some favours along the way. They will not have done us any favours. If the term “fair funding” continues to be used, it must genuinely reflect the need.

I see the Minister nodding and I appreciate that. When he comes to respond, I hope he will specifically take account of the huge strides that London schools have made and that he will want to build on them. Given the economic stress affecting every aspect from teachers to school buildings, I hope he will realise that funding levels need to be maintained. We have talked about levelling up—it may be easy to say, but it needs to be done. Other schools around the country should have the same achievement levels as schools in London. We should be a beacon and an example to the rest of the country; we should not be punished for our success.

5.56 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I congratulate hon. Members from both sides of the House on securing this debate.

Some months ago I was in the Chamber late one evening waiting for the next business. While waiting, I sat and watched as 15 or 20 MPs, mainly on the Government Benches, stood up one by one to present petitions. The petitions had almost identical wording, given the economic stress affecting every aspect from teachers to school buildings, I hope he will realise that funding levels need to be maintained. We have talked about levelling up—it may be easy to say, but it needs to be done. Other schools around the country should have the same achievement levels as schools in London. We should be a beacon and an example to the rest of the country; we should not be punished for our success.
and teachers, as well as in spreading good practice in learning so that all can benefit. It would be great if, for once, the Government could listen to those in local government—from both parties—to ensure that there is sufficient funding to level up school funding allocations so that no local authority area sees a cut in funding.

6.2 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) on not only his stewardship of the all-party group on London but his sterling work with the Justice Committee, which I serve on.

Redistribution is usually seen as a principle of the left. The last Labour Government sought to widen educational opportunity, from guaranteeing nursery places at one end of the age scale to pursuing the massification of higher education further up the age scale. They sought to stop education from being the preserve of the select few.

Achieving a fair funding formula to end the postcode lottery might look attractive at first glance, but plans designed to counter regional disparities and funding gaps have resulted in warnings—we have heard all the projections—that London schools could lose hundreds of millions of pounds to other regions.

I welcome the fact that we are having this debate at this juncture, because we are all somewhat in the dark. It would be good to have clarity today, because what is heard on the grapevine will worry headteachers in the capital. As right hon. and hon. Members have said, London contains some of the poorest communities in the country, and it has fared well under the status quo.

Since the dark days before 1997 and new Labour, when I was going through school—the days of leaking classrooms—London schools have become a success story nationally. With competing levels of disadvantage countrywide and a shake-up due, there are bound to be winners and losers in any new funding formula. When funding is reallocated, it is important that London is not left underfunded and that educational success is not left under the status quo.

London boroughs have received additional funding for years because the previous Labour Government were keen to help struggling pupils in the capital to catch up with pupils elsewhere in the country. We have heard that London councils estimate that school budgets in London could be slashed by 10%, but some press releases say the figure could be as high as 14%. It is rumoured that the consultation is likely to recommend phasing in whatever comes next so that angry London headteachers do not immediately suffer large cuts.

Whatever the motivation behind all this, I urge the Government to quash the rumours, think again, and heed advice—advice that often comes from their own side, as in the very eloquent opening speech in this debate. There have been some other unlikely bedfellows. The Mayor of London has made representations. The Conservative councillor Roy Perry, chairman of the Local Government Association’s children and young people board, has said:

“Councils know their areas best, and currently work in partnership with head teachers and governors to set a local funding formula which allows local needs and priorities to be addressed. We’d want to see this local conversation continue, rather than having all school budgets set in Whitehall.”

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): A point that has not been mentioned so far in any great detail is the lack of local flexibility in the proposals set out in the consultation and the implications that flow from that. One implication is that the DFE or the Education Funding Agency will have to know, for example, every school that has a private finance initiative agreement, what the costs are, and how they are going to be met at a time of also maintaining the per pupil funding formula.

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend makes the excellent point that local accountability seems to be lost in all this. We have a Government who said that they were in favour of devolution, and instead we have centralised diktats coming from on high.

The National Union of Teachers has claimed:

“Without significant additional resources, plans for reallocation of school funding between areas under the heading of ‘fair funding’ will not address schools’ funding problems and will impose even bigger cuts in many areas.”

In addition, there is the already-raised suspicion that forcing every state sector school in England to become an academy, thereby going into the hands of unaccountable private sector pseudo-charities, is privatisation by the back door. Compulsorily taking schools out of local authority control, which my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) mentioned, even when the local community opposes it, and handing them over, with their property deeds, infrastructure and taxpayer-funded education budgets, is massively opposed by many parents.

In my surgery, a complaint that often comes up is insufficient school places. I visit schools regularly; I did the assembly at St Augustine’s Priory School this week and I am doing Derwentwater Primary School’s next week. Teachers there raise a range of concerns, including recruitment and retention in London, particularly fuelled by the pricey property market. They talk to me about curriculum and assessment chaos. I have had 200 pieces of correspondence about forced academisation, with people pointing out that there is no evidence that academies improve outcomes. There is a cost to all this. Barbara Raymond from Acton says:

“We have lost social housing, are losing our health service and now our education system is being decimated.”

Dr Gill Reed of west Ealing is concerned that forced academisation will mean that schools are unable to remove asbestos from their buildings, because apparently Government funding for this was taken away, so if schools are using all their resources to convert into academies, that will put health and safety in our schools at risk as well. Sarah Mitchell, a parent who is also a teacher, is concerned about what will happen to the support services previously provided by local education authorities when they go over to private providers. John Davey of Ealing, in his 46th year of teaching, 21 of those in Ealing, says:
“This doctrinaire stance of the current government, supported by no research and choosing to ignore the available evidence, will do harm to generations of children.”

On the subject of unequal funding, it might just be coincidence, but the boroughs of Wokingham, Surrey, Windsor and Maidenhead have all seen the lowest cuts to their budgets. Between them, they represent the constituencies of half the Cabinet. The constituencies of the Home Secretary, Health Secretary, Leader of the House, Foreign Secretary and Justice Secretary are all covered by those areas, which also received £33.5 million in the transitional grant announced this year. To an alien looking at these things from outside, that seems politically motivated.

It is worth restating the London Councils figure of £245 million. In terms of people, that equates to 5,873 full-time teachers or 11,598 full-time teaching assistants. As has been pointed out, inner London will be hardest hit.

My constituency is in Ealing, which is the most inner of the outer London boroughs. Everyone who has spoken today, from the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst onwards, has said that there are dichotomous divides within boroughs. Some areas of Ealing have inner-city characteristics, such as Southall, which is outer London on the map, and Acton, which is inner London on the map and zone 2 for travelcard users.

Historically, we were never part of the Inner London Education Authority, but we have an excellent track record in delivering accessible education for our pupils. In 2015, Her Majesty’s chief inspector of schools rated the Ealing borough as having the most improved schools of all local authorities across England, but we do have deprived areas and areas with specific educational challenges, so I would say that our needs are higher than those of other suburban boroughs. None the less, all 14 high schools were rated good or outstanding by Ofsted, as were 59 of our 69 primary schools.

The predistributionary—if I can use that word—aspects remain sketchy, but Ealing Council’s ruling Labour group opposes academisation and wants to launch its own trusts to get around it. Should local authorities be allowed to do this? Should local authorities be working together? I would suggest that the latter is the better option. We should not be thinking of the two be working together?

Improving the life chances of local young people in Ealing should be a key objective in education. Ealing has a good record of success and of driving up standards for young people, with the council and schools working in partnership, but there is now a sense of a double whammy from the reallocated funding formula and the academies plan. Ealing Council officers have built up considerable expertise and flexibility, and the proposals are to the detriment of our young people. This is a top-down reorganisation from a Government who said, “No more top-down reorganisations”. One would have thought that they would have learned from their costly and unnecessary experiment with the health service.

Paul Goldsmith of Acton is a politics teacher in the independent sector. He wrote to me:

“I am a Governor of an outstanding primary school that under Conservative policy will be forced to be an academy. This means the Head and Governors over the next few years will have to work to the task of academisation, not maintaining an outstanding school.”

He also points out—remember that he is a politics teacher—that Conservatism can be defined as, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”, and asks what is the actual problem forced academisation is trying to fix if the school is outstanding. There are also questions about the financial stability and viability of academy chains as things stand. Plenty of academy chains have got into financial difficulties in order to meet Government targets. It is worth reiterating a phrase that has cropped up time and again: we should be levelling up, not levelling down.

Educational inequality, a degree of special pleading is necessary on behalf of London, because London is different. Its population is heading towards 10 million and its year-on-year population increase of 3% over the last Parliament was higher than the 1% for the rest of the country. The number of live births in Ealing increased by 31% between 2002-03 and 2010-11, which means that an additional 1,400 children a year have been born since 2002, although I think things have levelled off a bit. As an Ealing mum, I am probably one of the few people here to have experienced a bulge class. I remember being in a bulge class in 1983 as an Ealing pupil, as well.

There are concerns aplenty about the new proposals and the degree to which they tip over towards equalisation. Usually equalisation sounds like a good thing, but the proposals seem to be intended to benefit rural communities and buy off Conservative Members. We know that the Government have a small majority, and the proposals will ward off the rebellions that might be coming their way. There is a sense that the tinkering is a result of pressure from the heartlands.

I will end with one more quotation, from Rachael Stone, a primary school teacher from Acton who has been in the job for 20 years. She said that when she heard about the plans in the Budget to make her school an academy,

“my immediate response was that it is time for me to find a new career.”

We need to be careful about how we approach the issue and mindful of the need to avoid exacerbating the already plummeting morale among the teaching profession through academisation. We do not want to make a bad situation worse.

6.15 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab). My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) said a lot about education in Haringey, and I do not want to repeat it, but I want to speak briefly as a former Higher Education Minister. I have great respect for the Minister and consider him a friend—I have doubts about his politics, but I know that he is an intelligent and intellectual man who applies rigour to his job.
The Minister has heard a lot today about the need to level up funding. All Members recognise that there are real challenges for young people growing up in what would traditionally be described as white working-class environments—certainly in the seaside towns, and also in rural parts of the country. There are also many cities beyond London where there are real concerns about the educational picture and the league tables show that there is a lot to do.

However, the real challenge in our education system is not the gaps between state schools but the gap between state schools and private schools. That is why we have heard a lot about levelling up. The funding per pupil for students attending private schools is still double and more—[HON. MEMBERS: “Triple!”] Indeed, it is triple the funding for young people attending state schools. The ambition of all Governments, of whatever party, ought to be to reduce that gap, not to raid the budget of state schools.

A lot has been said about the success of education here in London, and it has indeed been a success story in the recent period. I was proud to support the London Challenge when it started, and we have certainly seen advances in London, including in my borough, but let us not go too far. Some 60% of young people in London on free school meals do not get five A to C grades in their GCSEs, and there is still a lot of work to do.

This city represents a larger share of our country’s GDP than at any time since 1911, and its competition is with Shanghai, Bombay, Berlin and Bonn. It is with a lot of countries that are investing in their education systems, not raiding schools’ funds. I know that when the Minister looks at the programme for international student assessment league tables, he will see where London stands—he will see that if we muck up the alchemy in London, my God will we undermine education in this country!

In respect of young people with English as a second language and families who have real needs because they are newly arrived in this country, if we change the formula just a bit we can see a huge slip-back in performance. I was at school in the 1970s and ’80s as part of the African-Caribbean community in this country, and I think it is largely agreed that there were significant failures in education for that minority community. We now see the repercussions of that ricocheting across our country.

We also ought to remember the review that the Prime Minister asked me to undertake over the year. More details were published recently. It is wonderful that we have seen a reduction in the number of young people attending young offenders institutions in this country, but there has been no reduction for black, Asian and minority ethnic young people—a lion’s share of them from London. In fact, things have gone the other way. Look, too, at our pupil referral units; there is a lot to do here in London.

Alongside all the issues that have been mentioned, there is the real issue of churn in our communities, because of the major housing crisis affecting the city. Housing is overcrowded. The vast majority of the young people we are concerned about are in private accommodation and move somewhere else every six months, across borough boundaries. A funding formula that does not take that mobility into account is in real danger of compounding problems, not alleviating them.

Let us think about context. There is a housing crisis. So many Londoners speak English as a second language. Real deprivation still exists right across London. There are the concerns, which we talk about in this place, about guns, knives and gangs in this city. Given all that, I say to the Minister that he should tread very carefully when it comes to making the sort of reductions to London’s funding over the next period that we have been hearing about. We will see a slip back. We will slip down the tables nationally, and our competitors in other countries will overtake us. The Government have to look again and find ways to level up the picture. They should remember that the real conversation about education in this country is not within the state sector, but between the state sector and the private sector.

6.21 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate, which was secured by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), supported by other Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed).

It has been a good, positive and wide-ranging debate. In addition to the speeches, we have had contributions by way of intervention from my right hon. Friends the Members for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) and for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), my hon. Friends the Members for West Ham (Lyn Brown), for Westminster North (Ms Buck), for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), and the hon. Members for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry), for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), for Kensington (Victoria Borwick), for Hornchurch and Upminster (Dame Angela Watkinson) and for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). The range of Members involved demonstrates the importance of the debate and the issue. I am pleased that the Minister has listened attentively throughout the debate. He has been exemplary in that respect, taking on board the issues that have been raised across the House.

With the last intervention in the debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich drew our attention to the dangers of taking away local flexibility while rushing for a national formula. That important issue was not mentioned by anyone else, so I thought it should be captured before I move on.

In an excellent opening speech, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst laid out the landscape really well. He reminded us of London’s high performance, describing it quite rightly as a success story. He also reminded us of the reason for London’s higher level of funding, namely the greater challenges it faces as a result of the number of youngsters with English as a second language, the breadth of the attainment gap and the deprivation in London. All those issues are very significant. His starting point was important; as he said, there is no issue with the principle of fair funding. That point was echoed by many Members from across the House throughout the debate.
What I liked most about the hon. Gentleman's speech was the sense of celebration—that here we have a success story and something we should celebrate. That was echoed by comments from many Members on both sides of the House, and by my hon. Friends in particular. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) talked about the huge strides that London has made. My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) reminded us that nine out of 10 London schools are good or outstanding. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North talked about the transformation of London schools since 2003 through the London Challenge. My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) reminded us of the many inspiring, hard-working teachers across her constituency, whose work is mirrored across the whole of London.

There is therefore something to celebrate, but there are concerns that it might be under threat. My hon. Friends the Members for Bethnal Green and Bow, and for Croydon North, pointed to analysis that suggested that funding might decrease for London; one estimate suggested that the cut in funding might be as great as £260 million a year. I understand why some hon. Members are rightly concerned about that, because it would be a huge funding cut.

In a thoughtful and considered contribution, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) explored the concern in the House that perhaps things are not being done in the right and proper way. Those perceptions may not be true, but that concern is palpable, and I am sure that the Minister's commitment in an intervention, when he said that he would meet groups of Members and engage properly with them, went a long way to reassuring my right hon. Friend. However, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith said, there is concern that there has been some special interest and access—not something that anybody wishes to happen. If that is the perception among some, the Minister's generous and immediate commitment to meeting Members who have expressed concern must be followed by real-world action and engagement.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham and others drew attention to the impact that mobility has on school costs in London. Much reference was made to housing issues in London—to the cost of housing, and to the nature of housing estates. I hope that the Minister will consider ways to include that mobility factor in the formula as it is developed. The former Chair of the Education Committee, the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), put the case for fair funding: if London is getting a good deal, everybody else needs to get one, too. He made that fair challenge in his usual passionate way.

Everyone will agree with the principle of fair funding, but the rub is that one person's fair funding can end up being another person's unfair funding. Although I commend the F40 group for its patient and persistent campaign to address the funding needs of its schools and children—indeed, I have been a supportive officer of that group in the past—care must be taken in how that is progressed. The Government have done the right thing in taking careful steps along that road, consulting before acting, and evaluating the consequences before proceeding. However, as this debate demonstrates, there is more to be done in that arena if the Government are to move forward with the confidence of the whole House. There is still no detail about who will be the winners and losers, and by how much, and that major concern naturally leads to the sort of speculation that we have heard today. I hope that the Minister and his colleagues will provide more details, and view today's debate as a constructive contribution to the ongoing consultation.

Labour's candidate for Mayor is right to stand up for the capital's children, and to express the concern that if there are the cuts that some analysts are predicting, it would do huge damage to the next generation of Londoners. The current London Mayor, together with Jules Pipe, chair of London Councils, made clear the case for ongoing investment in London's schools in a joint letter to the Secretary of State. They are all right. Schools are the first part of the skills and employment supply chain, and any reduction in funding is likely to impact negatively on the growth and productivity of local economies. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) made that point in a good and powerful contribution to the debate. She also talked about the schools and school communities that she is proud to represent, and which have made some of the greatest strides in school improvement over the past year.

The Department for Education's fair funding consultation document states that it intends to address the variability in funding levels by distributing more funding to areas that are underfunded, while “gradually reducing the funding of schools that have been generously funded to date”.

It is understandable that many in London fear that this will result in severe cuts to London schools' budgets, with a negative impact on the capital's young people. We all know that, with or without fair funding, all schools face a real-terms 8% cut in funding during the lifetime of this Conservative Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith detailed the type of budget pressures schools are under and having to manage. Schools are already having to cut back on extracurricular activities. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood said, extracurricular activities benefit low-income children the most, raising aspiration and opportunities. It is a shame that they are already under pressure.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) pointed out, schools are already taking subjects off the curriculum to balance the books. There is already pressure in the system, and there is a worry that there may be more pressure in the future. Any headteacher will tell you that teaching assistants and teachers will be next in the firing line if there are further reductions in spending. Dramatic reductions in funding in some areas will make the situation much worse. It is welcome that the Chancellor has committed £500 million to ease the transition from one system to another. However, the Treasury has said that this funding is dependent on how much the Department is willing to contribute. As the Department is faced with the need for more cash for its forced academisation plans, that has raised perfectly reasonable concerns. It is therefore imperative that we have more detail on both the funding formula and the funding underpinning the recent academisation announcement, so that we can see whether the amount of transitional funding available will be adequate to mitigate the costs of the changes.
The indicative modelling carried out by London Councils suggests that the Government would need to increase the direct schools grant by about £521 million, a figure alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North, to protect completely all schools—not just schools in London—in local authorities that would lose money under the national funding formula. So £500 million is being made available, and the modelling suggests that £521 million a year is required to ensure that no school will be worse off. A lot of Members have talked about levelling up, rather than levelling down.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) made the last contribution to the debate. He reminded us, in his usual highly eloquent style, that the greatest disparity is between funding for pupils in the state system and pupils in the private system. I agree with him that nothing should happen that is to the detriment of any pupils in the state system. We should aspire to match the best anywhere in the world. He alluded to the programme for international student assessment league tables and, in his inimitable fashion, said, “Don’t muck about with the alchemy in London.” I think that is the phrase of the debate. We should be careful what we muck about with as we take this forward.

To be fair, I think the Government are taking their plans forward carefully at the moment. There are things they could do more carefully in the light of this debate. I hope that the Minister will take this opportunity to give us his view on the levelling-up approach. Given the dramatic rise in standards under Labour’s London Challenge and investment in schools in the capital and across the country, is the Minister concerned that taking away funds from London schools will impact on results and outcomes? That concern has been echoed by Members across the Chamber.

I have one helpful suggestion—I am a helpful chap—for the Minister to consider as part of the ongoing consultation. The Secretary of State’s plan to force all good and outstanding schools to become academies against their wishes is estimated to cost £1.3 billion. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) said very succinctly, that is poor value for the taxpayer, and I tend to agree. Nobody wants this forced academy programme—certainly not the Minister’s Back Benchers, and certainly not local Conservative councillors. If Ministers dropped this plan, they would have more cash to play with to help deliver a truly fair funding formula. That would have the dual benefit of helping to deliver a manifesto commitment and leaving Education Ministers to focus their energy and effort on the things that really matter to parents and communities, without being distracted by an unhelpful row over forced academisation. Instead, Ministers would be able to tackle the real problems of place planning, teacher supply and exam chaos.

Labour supports fairer funding, but as always, the devil will be in the detail, and the jury is still out on whether there will be adequate mitigation in the system that this Government are bringing forward.

6.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Mr Sam Gyimah): I thank my hon. Friend for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) for securing this important debate, and I commend all the contributions, which have been hugely informative about education funding. As constituency MPs and parents, the subject is close to all our hearts.

For our country to grow stronger, fairer, wealthier and more secure, we need good schools and a well-educated population. Investing in education is an investment in the future of our children and our nation as a whole. That is why the Department is committed to delivering educational excellence everywhere—not just in London, but everywhere in the country—so that irrespective of where a child grows up, they can expect the best education possible.

There is no doubt that we are investing in education. The spending review confirmed a real-terms protection for the core schools budget. Throughout this Parliament, the money available for our schools will increase as pupil numbers increase. This will mean more than £40 billion next year, including pupil premium funding worth £2.5 billion a year targeted at the most disadvantaged pupils. That is also protected and will be maintained at current rates.

The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) made the point about who had been engaged in making the case for funding reform. He is normally assiduous and careful in how he puts his points across, but on this occasion I would like to disabuse him of the notion that the cross-party F40 group has somehow had special access. I met a range of stakeholders both before and during the consultation, including the Local Government Association, while London councils have met either me or my officials in the Department, and that will continue. I have also met a number of Members of all parties to discuss specific funding needs in their constituencies, and I have a number of union representatives on speed dial as far as this issue is concerned.

Stephen Timms: I do not think that the Minister would deny that there have been many discussions. I read out a list of the dates of the meetings, set out on the F40 website, between F40 representatives and the Department. I think he would accept that there has been much more discussion with that particular group than there has been with the others to which he has referred.

Mr Gyimah: Ministers cannot be criticised on the one hand for not listening, and then be criticised on the other for listening too much. The truth is that my door is always open, and I am happy to meet whoever knocks on my door to discuss the issues as often as is necessary to address them.

There is an important need to address the funding system. There is a risk that the current system will not deliver the outcomes that we want for our children. For too long, schools have struggled with funding systems that are both unfair and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst suggested, opaque. The amount of money that schools receive is now an accident of history, not a reflection of the needs of their pupils or children.

Local populations have changed over the past decade. For example, the proportion of children receiving free school meals in Manchester has fallen by 31% since 2005, while in Blackpool it has increased by 19%. However, schools funding has not kept up. The distribution of funding today cannot reflect the needs of our children.
if it has not changed in more than 10 years. The key question is not about levelling up or levelling down; it is about whether funding is addressing the individual needs of children.

The impact of the current funding system is hugely unfair. Let me look closer to home for the benefit of those who have spoken today. A child who is sent to school in Bexley will attract £4,635, but in next-door Greenwich, that suddenly becomes £6,020. Different local authorities also make different decisions about how to fund their schools. In 2015, Brent chose not to allocate any funding to pupils receiving free school meals, whereas Ealing chose to allocate nearly £1,700 to each primary pupil in exactly the same position.

We are committed to fixing that. I am proud to say that last month we launched the consultation referred to by the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), on new, fair, national funding formulas for schools and high needs. Our aims are clear, and I hope that Members in all parts of the House will agree that they are worthy. We want to create a formula that is fair, objective, transparent and simple. It should be clear how much funding is following each pupil, and that should be the same wherever they are in the country. Headteachers or academy trusts should know that if they move to take over underperforming schools, no matter where they are, their budgets will be fair and their schools will have the opportunity to excel.

Allocation is also important. We must allocate funding for high-needs provision, which has not been dwelt on today, on a fair and transparent basis. For too long, funding allocations have varied without reason. Parents and children with high needs deserve to know that the funding they require will be there, irrespective of where they choose to live. They deserve that security; they deserve that equality.

Robert Neill: I am grateful for what the Minister is saying. Will he assure me that he will present direct proposals to deal with the issue that was raised by our friend and colleague Councillor David Simmonds on behalf of the Local Government Association—the need to protect the high-needs element within any new arrangement for the formula?

Mr Gyimah: As my hon. Friend knows, what has taken place so far is the first stage of our consultation. The next stage will come up with detailed allocations for local authorities, but it will also make clear how each block within the dedicated schools grant would function within the system, and will certainly take account of my hon. Friend’s concerns about the high-needs block.

Stephen Timms: Will the Minister pay particular attention to the question of whether the schools block should include, as many have argued today, an element that would recognise the mobility within local authorities that we have been discussing?

Mr Gyimah: That is an important point. We will, of course, consider how the issue of mobility can best be addressed in the funding system. There are a number of ways of doing that, but it is certainly a priority in our determination of the new formula, along with in-year growth, population growth and so forth.

Despite the clear principles behind our national funding formula, there are still some myths about the potential impact on London, some of which we have heard about today. I want to take the opportunity to put those myths to bed. There is, for instance, the myth that the national funding formula is about London versus the rest of the country. There are two grounds on which that is simply wrong. First, the funding formula will deliver fairness to all parts of the country, whether they are urban or rural, shire or metropolitan, north or south. Secondly, London is not a homogenous area. At this moment, a parent who moved just a few miles from Haringey to Hackney—this point was made by the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West)—would increase the funding for their child by £1,000. We heard about areas such as Croydon—the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) made an interesting speech in this respect—that are struggling to recruit teachers because they cannot pay as much as better funded areas just up the road. We need a fairer funding system within London, just as much as we do across the whole country.

The second myth I want to dispel relates to funding for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, on which the right hon. Member for East Ham wanted a specific answer. I hope I can assure him that where pupils have additional needs, we will provide extra funding. This is a fundamental principle of the national funding formula to ensure that such pupils can overcome entrenched barriers to success.

Ruth Cadbury: I thank the Minister for his willingness to listen and the depth of his investigation into all the different issues around the funding formula. In the context of disadvantaged pupils, he just talked about “additional needs”. What does he mean by that? Is he talking about special needs or the issues that Opposition Members have been raising about the inherent disadvantages experienced by children living on very low incomes in many of our communities?

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Lady raises a good point. I am talking about additional needs in both respects, and during my speech I will address them. Obviously, some additional needs are addressed within the school system, and some within the high-needs block, but I will touch on both of those.

As our recent consultation made clear, the formula should contain a significant element of additional funding for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, and there should be funding on top of the basic per-pupil amount for pupils on free school meals, pupils with low prior attainment and pupils who speak English as an additional language. The higher the level of need in a school, the higher the funding will be. I could not be clearer on this point, and anyone who engaged with the consultation will have seen that set out in black and white.

Some have suggested that the national funding formula will not take into account the higher costs faced by schools in London. Again, our proposals could not be clearer. We consulted on a proposal for an area cost adjustment—a general increase for schools facing extra costs from higher wages—which will be important for schools in London. Our second consultation will detail exactly how this would work.
The final myth I would like to address is that so-called cuts in London will undo the huge improvement in standards in recent years. Schools in London have improved tremendously in recent years. It is testament to the hard work of teachers, headteachers, pupils and their parents. There are schools up and down the country, however, that are still getting excellent results in spite of the funding system, not because of it. The national funding formula will put funding where it is needed, so that all schools have the best opportunity to deliver a world-class education for their pupils.

As hon. Members have made clear, London’s schools are thriving and continue to thrive. Moreover, in the last 10 years, the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals has dropped from 27% to 18%, and the number of pupils living in highly deprived areas has also dropped dramatically, but of course challenges remain. The funding system will recognise the challenges in London. That is why London will continue to benefit from the pupil premium, receiving £436 million this year—nearly 20% of the total across the country. This is vital. We can see excellent examples across London of pupil premium funding being used to ensure that disadvantaged students receive the best opportunities for their education.

As for future funding, as I have said, we will publish proposals on the details for schools and high needs in the second consultation. In the meantime, hon. Members will understand why it would not be appropriate for me to speculate on the specific impacts of the new formula in London; suffice it to say that the new formula will reflect the responses to the consultation, rather than the specific requests made by the cross-party F40 group. The consultation so far has been very important, because the devil is in the detail, and his willingness to engage with members of the group is appreciated. This is obviously an important issue, and it was therefore important to ventilate it on the Floor of the House before the consultation finished. I am grateful to all Members for their help.

Mr Gyimah: I would be delighted to meet the all-party group to discuss these issues before, during and after the consultation.

We still have a big and difficult job ahead of us. Reorganising £40 billion of schools funding is not an easy task, and it is one that we should carry out carefully and thoughtfully. We need to think through the transitions, as the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) so eloquently said. I continue to find encouragement from the wide support that exists for these reforms across the country, throughout the sector and between political parties. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst for putting this matter on the agenda again in the Chamber. Providing educational excellence everywhere is a key part of our mission, and it is something that we need to do very carefully. After all, this is about this country’s future. A number of important points have been raised in the debate, and they will be reflected in the consultation and in the formula. I look forward to engaging with Members across the House to ensure that we have fairer funding for all our schools and all our children.

Mr Speaker: I know that the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) will make a brief wind-up speech. Even though he is a distinguished lawyer, if on this occasion he could confine himself to the norm of two or three minutes, we would all be greatly delighted, especially those who are waiting to present petitions and the Member who has the Adjournment debate. So the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst really just has an opportunity to clear his throat.

6.52 pm

Robert Neill: Thank you for giving me that time, Mr Speaker. I should like to thank all Members who have participated in the debate, and to thank the Backbench Business Committee for making it possible. This has been a constructive debate. It is not always necessary to approach these subjects in a partisan fashion, although there have been some partisan speeches. If we strip out the rhetoric, however, we find key issues on which there is common ground, as the Minister and the shadow Minister recognised. I am grateful to the Minister for his assurances about meeting the group and about taking on board some of the key issues that have been flagged up around the high-needs element, mobility, which is particularly important, special educational needs, and cost pressures and cost adjustment. He will know that the devil is in the detail, and his willingness to engage with members of the group is appreciated. This is obviously an important issue, and it was therefore important to ventilate it on the Floor of the House before the consultation finished. I am grateful to all Members for their help.

Margot James (Stourbridge) (Con): That was succinct.

Mr Speaker: It was extremely succinct. We are greatly indebted to the hon. Gentleman.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the Government’s intention to implement a new funding formula for schools from April 2017; welcomes the Department for Education’s commitment to hold a detailed consultation on this proposal; calls on the Government to ensure that any changes to the funding model are both fair and proportionate to London’s needs.

PETITIONS

Children’s Centre Services in Corby

6.52 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I rise to present a petition relating to children’s centre services in Corby which has the support of more than 1,700 people. Children’s centres mitigate many of the challenges faced by children in Corby, and their services are relied on by many local families.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Corby and the surrounding areas, Declares that children in Corby statistically fair worse in education, income levels, life expectancy and health than children in many other parts of the UK; further that Children’s Centres mitigate these challenges; further that many families in Corby depend upon the services provided by their local Children’s Centre; further that Northamptonshire County Council is proposing to cut the budget of Corby’s Children’s Centre services by 25%,
further that these additional funding cuts are unfair and indefensible; and further that an online petition on this matter has been signed by over 1,700 individuals.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Northamptonshire County Council to stop their proposed funding cuts of 25% to the budget of Corby’s Children’s Centre services.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P001689]

Bowel Cancer Screening

6.53 pm

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): I rise to present a petition on the subject of bowel cancer screening in the names of Lauren, Peter, David and Scott Backler. My constituent, Lauren Backler, lost her mum to bowel cancer, the second most common cancer in terms of the number of lives it takes each year. She was only 56, which meant she was too young to be part of the screening process in England, although not in Scotland, where screening starts at the age of 50. There is public demand for the screening age in England to be brought into line with that of Scotland, as has been evidenced by the online petition in Lauren’s name which has now gathered more than 216,000 signatures. In a Westminster Hall debate on this subject, the Minister recognised the significant level of parliamentary interest in the matter.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the UK, declares that the age at which bowel cancer screening is offered by the NHS is too high at 60 years old, with up to 6,000 people in their 50s diagnosed with the condition each year; further that, when bowel cancer is diagnosed in its later stages, the five-year survival rate is 7%, compared to 97% when caught early; and further that an online petition on this matter has been signed by over 163,000 individuals.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department of Health to consider the case for lowering the age of bowel cancer screening in England to the age of 50, in line with the screening age in Scotland.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P001690]
Andrew Gwynne: As I was saying, in addition the Transport Act 1985 allows local authorities the option of retaining or removing a limit on the number of hackney carriage licences they issue. Prior to 1985, local authorities could simply set a limit on the number of hackney carriage licences they issued. That meant the licences became an asset, with a monetary value; nobody could simply apply for a hackney carriage licence if the limit had been reached, so the only way to obtain one was by purchasing the rights to a licence from an existing licence holder. Values of hackney carriage licences reached £30,000 or more—for the rights to the licence only; that did not include the vehicle.

The 1985 Act required local authorities either to remove their limit on hackney vehicle licences, de-restricting numbers, or to justify keeping a limit by holding an "unmet demand survey" every three years. The survey would assess the demand for hackneys in the council area and adjust—or increase—the set limit by the required number. In councils that retained a limit on hackney numbers, hackney licences—the plates—retained their value, and to this day taxi owners in these areas still view the value of their plates as an asset that they can cash in at some stage in the future by selling the plates on. In councils that removed their limit, the hackney trade was simply allowed to find its own level. There is only a certain amount of demand for hackney carriages, and, theoretically, hackney vehicle numbers will self-limit, because of the demand, or otherwise, for hackney carriages in each local authority area.

Since the existing hackney legislation was introduced in 1847, hackney carriages have always been able to carry out pre-booked work in the same way as private hire vehicles. Hackney carriage drivers can supplement their income by hiring a radio or PDA—personal digital assistant—from a private hire operator and carrying out private hire work alongside all the other private hire vehicles and drivers. The legislation also currently allows vehicles licensed as hackney carriages in one area to carry out pre-booked private hire work anywhere else in England and Wales, apart from in London and, bizarrely, Plymouth, which are covered by separate pieces of legislation. This is not a loophole or a fiddle, but something that has always been permitted; it is not expressly prohibited by the existing legislation.

The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 introduced legislation that, for the first time, governed private hire vehicles, drivers and operators, and set the legal parameters within which these vehicles were allowed to operate. This legislation did not affect the ability of hackney carriages to carry out pre-booked work anywhere in the country, because in 1976 all authorities had limits on the number of hackney licences, so there was no huge problem with hackney carriages working “cross-border”. There was always sufficient work for hackneys within their own boroughs and counties, and they were therefore not tempted to move to another authority to pick up additional work.

The introduction of the 1985 Act did not have a massive effect at first; a few local authorities removed their restriction on hackney numbers, but most kept the limit. Over time this has changed, and many more authorities have removed the limit, but matters only started coming to a head in the mid-2000s. The problems started in the north-east of England. In 2006, Newcastle City Council noticed that a number of their private hire drivers and owners left the authority and obtained hackney vehicle licences from the neighbouring borough of Berwick-upon-Tweed, as it did not impose a limit on hackney numbers and its procedures for obtaining licences were much easier than those set out in Newcastle. In two years, the number of hackney licences issued by Berwick rose from 42 to 672. The vast majority of those vehicles were owned by people who lived in Newcastle and used their vehicles for private hire work in Newcastle. For Newcastle City Council, there were a number of problems. First, officers from Newcastle had no powers to deal with complaints or issues involving Berwick vehicles and drivers. Only the licensing borough’s offices can deal with matters relating to their vehicles and their drivers.

Secondly, Newcastle had lost the ability to regulate numbers and, thirdly, there were more serious concerns: the much stricter policies and conditions imposed by Newcastle on its hackney and private hire fleet were being undermined by the influx of Berwick-licensed vehicles and drivers who were regulated by much less strict policies and conditions.

The matter went to court via a judicial review, which was heard in the High Court. The judge in that case, although sympathetic to the issues raised by Newcastle City Council, stated that Berwick-licensed vehicles and drivers were operating entirely within the relevant legislation and were doing nothing illegal.

That is now pertinent to Greater Manchester, because, although all 10 of the Greater Manchester metropolitan boroughs have fairly stringent rules and regulations in place governing who can and cannot apply for hackney licences, there is a problem in that a neighbouring authority across the county boundary in Lancashire is issuing quite a large number of hackney licences. We are now seeing those licence holders operating within Greater Manchester. I am referring to Rossendale, which is a small Lancashire district council. About a decade or so ago, following the Berwick judgment, the number of applications for hackney carriage and vehicle and driver licences started to increase in that particular authority.
At that time—I appreciate that things have changed—Rossendale’s standards were less restrictive than those of the 10 Greater Manchester metropolitan boroughs. It did not, for example, require applicants to pass an English language test or a local knowledge test. It also had much less restrictive conditions for hackney vehicles. It would, in effect, license almost all types of vehicles—saloons, estates and hatchbacks and so on—as hackney vehicles. Its age limits for vehicles were more relaxed and vehicles were tested to a lower standard than that of the Greater Manchester boroughs.

Previously, those policies and conditions had been fine for a small borough such as Rossendale, but it started to become apparent that the owners and drivers of these cabs were not in fact using the vehicles in that particular local authority. They were using them as private hire vehicles in other local authorities—indeed, lots of other local authorities. They started appearing in other Lancashire boroughs first: Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley and Hyndburn. They then started popping up in Greater Manchester boroughs: Oldham, Rochdale, Bury, Central Manchester, Tameside and Stockport. By 2015, Rossendale was issuing approximately 2,500 hackney vehicle licences a year and more than 3,000 hackney driver licences. By comparison, Tameside council currently has 150 hackney carriages and 450 private hire vehicles. To put that into context, the population of Tameside is around 221,000, and Rossendale has a population of fewer than 70,000 residents. It is clear what is going on.

As I have already said, no law is being broken. Rossendale-licensed vehicles are allowed to operate across almost the whole of England, and indeed that is what they do. They are working in Leeds, Bradford, Birmingham, Bristol and even Cornwall. There are large numbers of these vehicles operating in Greater Manchester, and licensing offices within Greater Manchester’s 10 boroughs are virtually powerless to deal with these vehicles and drivers. Some are known to have been refused licences for perfectly good reasons by the Greater Manchester local authorities.

In areas where policies and conditions are strict and high standards are required, the influx of out-of-county vehicles has been a particular problem. Members of the public regularly complain about poor standards of English and drivers who do not know the local area. Licensing officers and managers are concerned that their high standards are being seriously undermined, and there is particular concern in the light of what happened in Rochdale and Rotherham that child safeguarding could also be undermined.

To be fair, Rossendale has moved on that. For instance, the council has now adopted the Greater Manchester-approved convictions policy, which should ensure that its drivers are in future vetted to the same standards as drivers across Greater Manchester. In addition, Rossendale council has just introduced an intended use policy whereby, following the judgment in the Berwick case, it will now ask applicants whether they intend to use their vehicle within the borough of Rossendale and will refuse to grant a licence if the answer is no, but the policy will be slow to take effect as the council has given it a soft landing and it will not apply until 2017. Plus, if we do not change or tighten up the law, another council, if not this council or Berwick, will spot an income-generating opportunity in much the same way.

I want to turn briefly to the Law Commission report. The Minister will know that between 2013 and 2014, the Law Commission conducted a consultation on potential new taxi legislation for England and Wales. At the start of the consultation, it stated that it was looking to take a “clean sheet of paper” approach and potentially redesign the whole licensing regime from the ground up. Some early suggestions included removing the two-tier taxi licensing structure entirely and introducing a single national standard for vehicles and drivers.

The Law Commission was overwhelmed by the number of responses to the consultation, and the final report was far from the clean sheet approach that it promised. The final recommendations were, in fact, extremely watered down and seemed simply to be a re-write of the existing legislation with a few problems ironed out. Since publication of the report, it seems to have been shelved and no further proposals for changes to legislation have emerged, apart from two small ones that were introduced in October 2015 via the Deregulation Act 2015. The first was that drivers’ licences should last for three years and operators’ licences for five years, and the second was that operators should now be allowed to sub-contract bookings to operators in other councils.

I want to be positive in the last few minutes of my speech and give examples of how we might be able to deal with the issue. I have a number of ideas. First, I suggest that there could be a requirement that operators could operate only with vehicles and drivers licensed within their own council area. This would prevent out-of-council vehicles and drivers from working outside their licensed areas on other operating systems. Secondly, I suggest national standards for vehicles and drivers. If standards were consistent across the country, there would be no need for applicants to travel out of their council area looking for a more relaxed licensing regime. Thirdly, licensing officers could be given powers to deal with any licensed vehicle and driver, not just those vehicles and drivers licensed within their own council area. Fourthly, could the Minister consider making changes through the buses Bill? That might seem an odd piece of legislation to choose, so let me explain to the Minister why I think that it is pertinent.

Over the past few years in Greater Manchester we have seen a number of evening and bank holiday bus services removed because the subsidy from Transport for Greater Manchester has been removed, but rather than leave communities isolated—this is quite an innovative idea—TFGM has produced something called Local Link, which is a local telephone number that any user within the old area of the bus service that has been removed, or when a bus is not running, can ring to get a private hire taxi cab. The taxi will come and pick the person up and take them door to door, so long as that is within roughly the same area as the old bus service that was withdrawn. Because of the small numbers of people concerned, that is cheaper than subsidising a bus service used by very few people.

However, TFGM is using private hire companies in Greater Manchester that may well employ private hire drivers and vehicles that were not licensed by any of the 10 Greater Manchester authorities, and that raises some concerns for the travelling public. There might be an opportunity at least to give Greater Manchester additional
regulatory powers in that respect through the legislation that I hope we will be pleased to see in the Queen’s Speech next week.

Lastly, I want to give a quick plug for guide dogs. I have worked with the charity Guide Dogs, which told me in advance of this debate that as the law stands, drivers who refuse to take passengers accompanied by guide dogs can face a modest fine through the courts, but not necessarily a revocation of their licence. It would be entirely up to the issuing authority whether such drivers were able to continue operating and, as we have heard, the issuing authority does not have to consider the interests of the population in whichever area the driver was operating.

To sum up, I hope the Minister will agree with the points that I have raised this evening. Privately, I am sure that he will agree that the taxi licensing regime is drastically outdated. I implore him to get his skates on and have his Department respond in full to the Law Commission report on taxi licensing. Let us sort out the problems that we face in Greater Manchester, and let us sort out the guide dogs issue too.

Andrew Jones: I congratulate the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) on securing the Adjournment debate this evening. I know that the topic of taxi and private hire licensing issues has been covered in previous debates in the House. Colleagues are very interested in the subject, but I doubt whether many colleagues could match the historical knowledge that the hon. Gentleman brought to the debate this evening.

As hon. Members will appreciate, although the Government are responsible for creating the legislative framework within which local licensing authorities license taxis and private hire vehicles, responsibility for licensing rests with the local authority. It is the local authority’s responsibility to decide who is a suitable person to hold a taxi or private hire vehicle driver’s licence or a private hire operator’s licence. The local authority is responsible for ensuring that all its licensees comply with the rules and regulations that govern their industry.

I understand the hon. Gentleman’s desire to raise on the Floor of the House his concerns about what is happening locally in his area—he obviously has an inside track on the situation in his council—but as licensing is the responsibility of the local authority, I may not be able to address all his points.

Let me start by emphasising the importance of the taxi and private hire vehicle industry. The traditional taxi has become an icon of passenger transport in the UK and around the world. The taxi industry has played a key role in keeping Britain moving for many years, and has a history and reputation that drivers are rightly proud of. The UK’s taxi industry is recognised as one of the best in the world. All the vehicles are of a high standard and are driven by skilled and knowledgeable drivers. I admire the time and dedication that prospective drivers put into becoming taxi drivers—perhaps most famously London cabbies, who have to learn the world-famous “knowledge” of London. That brings the reward of having the unique right to ply for hire on the streets.

In the 1960s, minicabs began to appear in London and the private hire vehicle industry began growing across the UK. Licensing and regulation have ensured that when using such services the public have the same assurance of safety as when using a taxi, and have raised standards throughout the private hire sector. As of March 2015, there were 242,200 licensed taxi and private hire vehicles in England—an increase of 9.3% in just two years—and 69% of those vehicles are private hire vehicles. The availability of taxis and private hire vehicles offers the public real choice: they can instantly hire a taxi in the street or at a taxi rank, or they can pre-book a taxi or a private hire vehicle. When pre-booking, passengers can make an informed choice based on factors such as price, availability and quality. The combination of taxi and private hire ensures that the needs of as many customers as possible can be met.

Andrew Gwynne: If a licensing authority such as Tameside or Stockport in my constituency decides for perfect legitimate reasons that somebody is unsuitable to be a taxi operator in its area, should it not have the power to enforce that to prevent that person from getting a licence from another local authority and operating on the streets of Tameside or Stockport?

Andrew Jones: I am coming to cross-border working and licensing. We have had some terrible cases across the country, which have clearly shown that the system has failed in certain areas. We all know these cases, and they are positively shocking.

The industry is seeing real change as new technology provides new ways for the public to engage taxis and private hire vehicles. Smartphone booking apps are now available for taxis and private hire vehicles, offering passengers easy access to services, more choice, faster pick-ups and options for sharing, which can reduce cost. It is encouraging that the London taxi trade has been at the forefront of that technological change. There are now numerous smartphone apps for booking a taxi, and more drivers are embracing cashless payment options. However, that new technology is challenging the traditional operating boundaries between the taxi and private hire trades. That is straining the relationship between local authorities and the industry, but by working in partnership they can deliver a modern industry that continues to provide choice and high standards.

I would like to say a few words about an issue that is particularly important to me. The Government are committed to building transport networks that work for everyone, ensuring that disabled people have the same access to services, and the same opportunities to travel, as other members of society. Disabled people are heavily reliant on buses and particularly on taxis and private hire vehicles, which are critical. That is why the Government intend to commence sections 165 and 167 of the Equality Act 2010 this year. That will impose duties on the driver of a taxi to accept and assist a wheelchair user and not to charge extra for doing so.

I would also like to mention the Government’s ongoing work to improve air quality and reduce emissions in the taxi and private hire sector. In March 2015 the Government launched a £20 million scheme to support the roll-out of ultra-low-emission taxis across the UK. A further £25 million was set aside specifically for the Greater London area, to help taxi drivers cover the cost of
upgrading to a greener vehicle. Our aim is for almost every car and van to be a zero-emission vehicle by 2050. The transition to ultra-low-emission taxis is especially important to help improve air quality in our towns and cities.

The hon. Gentleman made specific points about working across areas, and I would like to address those now. The issue involves taxis and private hire vehicles licensed in one area working in another. I appreciate the concern here, but while standards vary between authorities, all taxis and private hire vehicles and their drivers should have been licensed by their home authority, thereby ensuring that the driver is a fit and proper person and that the vehicle is safe.

Local licensing authorities have a duty to ensure that any person to whom they grant a taxi or PHV licence is a fit and proper person to hold such a licence. The term “fit and proper” is not defined in legislation, but the procedure for assessing a driver’s fitness will typically involve criminal record and medical checks. In an instance where a driver commits an offence in a jurisdiction in which he is not registered, the local authority where the offence was committed can prosecute.

The points raised about protecting more vulnerable users are incredibly important in this regard. Some of the cases we have seen in different parts of the country are shocking. I therefore take this opportunity to address the issue of child sexual exploitation related to the taxi and private hire vehicle industry. Let me start by reiterating the Government’s commitment to eradicating the risk to children and vulnerable people from taxi and minicab drivers who seek to abuse their position of trust. I would also like to make it clear that local authorities are responsible for background and safety checks on all employees, including drivers, who work with children and vulnerable people. They have a duty of care to ensure that young people are protected.

The Government expect those who exercise licensing functions routinely to use the powers available to them to protect young people safely. We encourage all local authorities to carry out an enhanced criminal record check on everyone who applies to drive taxis and minicabs. We want to ensure that our licensing arrangements provide the strongest possible protection to children and vulnerable people. We are drawing on lessons learnt in Oxfordshire, Rotherham and other places. I know that there is currently a very topical issue in Lancashire in a neighbouring authority. We are drawing on these lessons to reform and strengthen the law. I have been meeting Home Office Ministers and will continue to work on this.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Law Commission. The Law Commission undertook a very comprehensive review and published its final report, which contained recommendations for a modern and simplified structure. The legislation that governs this industry goes back hundreds of years and is convoluted. The Law Commission’s report provided not only a review but a solutions designed to make a difference to the travelling public and to those who work in the industry, either from a driving or a licensing perspective. As a Government, we are considering the Law Commission’s recommendations. I recognise the hon. Gentleman’s point about getting a move on with this. That is very timely, as we are working on it. I cannot yet give him a date for when the scrutiny will be complete. We will respond as soon as we can, and I recognise the requirement to do so.

The hon. Gentleman raised other points that I will mention briefly. I am happy to take ideas from all sides as to how we can improve the service, but it might be quite restrictive to operate only within a council area—for example, in the airport taxi service market. There are some difficulties there. However, I am happy to consider all sorts of interesting ideas.

Andrew Gwynne: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Jones: It will have to be very speedy.

Andrew Gwynne: One of the benefits of an area such as Greater Manchester is that it is a big city region, so perhaps we could have a specific regulatory framework for Greater Manchester taxis.

Andrew Jones: I am happy for local authorities to work together to set high standards in their areas, and there is nothing stopping them from doing so. We should all be seeking to raise standards.

The issue of Rossendale’s performance has been raised. I suggest that I write to Rossendale to highlight the concerns that Members have expressed and make sure that it is aware of them. There are quite significant differences between the fees charged in Rossendale for a licence and those charged in Greater Manchester. That might reflect the different standards. It might also reflect the bulk purchasing that Rossendale may be able to do because it processes so many applications. In any case, I will raise the issues with Rossendale and come back to the hon. Gentleman when I get its reply.

The Government are fully aware of the changes and challenges affecting the taxi and private hire vehicle industry across the country, including in and around Denton and Reddish. There are the challenges not only of new technology and increased competition but of the need to ensure that vehicles play their part in improving air quality and accessibility. I believe the reputation of the British taxi trade to be high, and the quality of service it can offer means that it should be well placed to continue to compete in this changing market and have a strong and healthy future. Taxis are an important part of the transport mix in all areas. It is now our responsibility to make sure that they have the regulatory regime among local councils to ensure that they can continue to ply their trade profitably, but securely, for the people whom they serve.

Question put and agreed to.

7.29 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Thursday 5 May 2016

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

Faversham Oyster Fishery Company Bill [Lords]
Lords message (4 May) relating to the Bill considered. Resolved,
That this House concurs with the Lords in their resolution. —
(The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.)

Haberdashers’ Aske’s Charity Bill [Lords]
Lords message (4 May) relating to the Bill considered. Resolved,
That this House concurs with the Lords in their resolution. —
(The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.)

New Southgate Cemetery Bill [Lords]
Lords message (4 May) relating to the Bill considered. Resolved,
That this House concurs with the Lords in their resolution. —
(The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.)

Oral Answers to Questions

DEPARTMENT FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—
Great British Food Campaign

1. David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Great British Food campaign in promoting British food and drink. [904817]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): We set up the Great British Food Unit to drive export growth and help companies identify new opportunities. The British brand is world renowned for heritage and quality. In April, I was in the US championing products from the great British curry to gin and British beef and lamb.

David Morris: I thank my right hon. Friend for that impressive response. Britain is famous for its seafood, and the delicacy of Morecambe bay shrimps, from my constituency, is internationally renowned. It is nice to know that the Government are doing all that they possibly can to ensure that such dishes are on international dinner plates; will she elaborate a little on what she is doing to make sure that they are internationally renowned?

Elizabeth Truss: I agree that Morecambe bay shrimps are a fine product, along with other great Lancashire products, such as Bury black pudding, the Eccles cake and the hotpot. May I make a suggestion? Yorkshire has three protected food names, whereas Lancashire has only one. At the Department we would be very keen to help Lancashire producers get that protected status, so that they can become world renowned, too.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that Weetabix, which is based in Burton Latimer in my constituency, is a great British breakfast cereal, because she launched the Great British Food Unit at its headquarters. Will she ensure that Weetabix is always served at her Department’s breakfast meetings and all the international trade symposiums it organises around the world?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that Weetabix is a fantastic product. Not only is it exported around the world, but all of the wheat is grown within 50 miles of the Weetabix factory, so it is a real example of linking through from farm to fork. I proudly display my own box of Elizabeth Truss Weetabix on my desk at the Department for all visitors to see when they arrive at my office.

Mr Speaker: It is always useful to have a bit of information. We are very greatly obliged to the Secretary of State, as we have learned more about her domestic arrangements.

Badger Cull

2. Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): If she will reconsider her Department’s plans to extend the badger cull; and if she will make a statement. [904818]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The Government are taking action to deliver a long-term strategy to eradicate bovine TB in England and protect the future of the dairy and beef industries. That strategy includes strengthening cattle testing and movement controls, improving biosecurity on farm, and badger control in areas where TB is rife. The veterinary advice is clear that there is no example in the world of a country that has successfully eradicated TB without also tackling the reservoir of the disease in the wildlife population.

Ann Clwyd: Badger culling in England costs around £7,000 per badger killed; in Wales, the badger vaccination programme costs around £700 per badger vaccinated. Lord Krebs, the renowned scientific adviser on the subject, has continually said that “rolling out culling as a national policy to control TB in cattle is not really credible.” Why, then, do the Government persist with a policy that is stupid, costly and ineffective?

George Eustice: The cost of doing nothing would be £1 billion in 10 years’ time. As for the cost of running the culls, there were one-off costs initially, but those
were halved in the most recent culls last year. The right hon. Lady will also be aware that Wales has had to suspend the vaccination programme because of a lack of availability of vaccine and on the advice of the World Health Organisation. The vaccination programme was also in a tiny pilot area of about 1.5% of Wales. Wales has had success with cattle movement controls just as we have done, and that is the reason it has been able to bear down on the disease in the same way we have.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My hon. Friend the Minister has already pointed out issues with bovine TB. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile)—who is not in his place—and I share a love of hedgehogs. Years ago I brought a hedgehog into the Chamber, which was completely out of order—[Interruption.] Not in your time, Mr Speaker: it was under Baroness Boothroyd, who did not approve. It did something terrible in my hand, I dropped it and it scurried off. That is off the point, sorry.

The hedgehog population is falling, and it is partly because they are part of the food chain of badgers. Badgers may be cuddly, while hedgehogs have spikes but they are cuddly too, and we need to remember that they are being attacked by all the badgers where there is no cull.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend is a real advocate for hedgehogs, and many other hon. Members have supported their cause, including my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile). Some research suggests that badgers compete with hedgehogs for some foods and in their environment, but there are many other pressures on the hedgehog, including gardens that are not particularly hedgehog friendly. Everybody can play a role in helping hedgehog populations to recover.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is, of course, national hedgehog week, and we need to do all that we can to protect their habitats rather than blaming badgers. Usually when experts tell us that something is not working the sensible thing to do is to stop. So why, when the Government’s experts said that last year’s efforts were ineffective and inhumane, and when bovine TB increased by 34% in Somerset, is the Department so determined to push ahead with yet more culling? May we have a moratorium on the granting of any more licences this year until we have had a full public debate, with all the information in the public domain, so that we can decide whether it is worth proceeding with culling?

George Eustice: The country’s leading experts on tackling bovine TB are in DEFRA, including the chief vet and his veterinary team. Their advice is clear: we will not eradicate this disease unless we also tackle the reservoir of disease in the wildlife population. That is why we are committed to a roll-out of the cull in areas where the disease is rife.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): The Minister was characteristically generous to the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd). Can he give us the figures for the increase in outbreaks of bovine TB in Wales and in England? For those of us who have constituents on the Welsh border, will he continue to roll out the cull and do as much as he can, rather than punishing beef and dairy farmers with post-movement testing?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend will be aware that in England we slaughtered some 28,000 cattle a year. Last year, both England and Wales saw a slight increase in the prevalence of the disease, but that tends to move in cycles. In the previous year, we saw a slight reduction in the disease. I understand that the cattle movement controls we have put in place are frustrating for some farmers, but they are also a necessary part of eradicating this disease. We have to do all of these things—deal with the reservoir of disease in the wildlife population, improve biosecurity on farms and, yes, improve cattle movement controls so that we can reduce transmission of the disease.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): When will the Minister be able to give the scientific figures for the badger cull areas to show the reduction in the amount of disease in cattle?

George Eustice: As my hon. Friend knows, the randomised badger culling trials a decade or more ago found that the benefits of the culling of badgers were only seen some four years after the conclusion of the culls. The reality is that the programme is a long-term commitment and it will be several years before we can see the impact of the culls. From figures from last year, however, we know that perturbation, which several hon. Members have previously highlighted to me, was actually far less of an issue in years one and two of the culls in Gloucester and Somerset than people predicted.

Air Quality

3. Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What recent progress has her Department made on reducing levels of air pollution; and what targets she has set for air quality in 2016. [904819]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): Air quality is improving. Since 2010, emissions of nitrogen oxides have fallen by 17%. We will further improve air quality through a new programme of clean air zones, alongside investment in clean technologies.

Neil Coyle: Elephant and Castle, in my constituency, has the worst air quality in south London. Air pollution has a proven impact on people’s health and life expectancy. Nearly 9,500 people die each year in London due to poor air quality, which is why my right hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan), a candidate for London Mayor, is planning to consult on bringing forward and expanding the ultra-low emission zone if he wins today. He knows London cannot wait. Why is he not announcing a comprehensive strategy for the whole country today?

Elizabeth Truss: The fact is that it is my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park ( Zac Goldsmith) who has made cleaner air a priority of his mayoral campaign. He has a long-standing record of talking
about environmental issues, unlike his opponent. The Government have set out a very clear plan for clean air zones right across the country to deal with this issue. We are prepared to mandate those zones to ensure we are in line with World Health Organisation limits.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): DEFRA’s plan says that local authority action is critical to achieving improvements in air quality. On this local elections day, will the Secretary of State tell us what resources she will provide to struggling councils to do that, given that her Department has cut payments to councils under the air quality grant scheme by nearly 80% since 2010? Will she give councils the powers they need to tackle this problem, not just in the five cities but wherever people are suffering—in some cases, even dying—because the air is not clean enough for them to breathe?

Elizabeth Truss: We absolutely have given powers to all cities that want to implement a clean air zone. They are fully able to do that. We will also assist with funding for the five cities projected to be above the WHO limit of 40 mg of nitrogen oxide. We are working with those local authorities at the moment. We need to ensure the zones are in the right place so that the problem does not get moved from one part of the city to another. The resources will be available for those local authorities to put that in place.

British Farming

4. Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential contribution of data and technology to increasing the productivity and competitiveness of British farming.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Data and technology have a central role to play in increasing the productivity and competitiveness of British farming. Last October, I launched the first of our agri-tech centres of excellence, the agrimetric centre at Rothamsted. They will develop new software models to improve our ability to understand and utilise the huge volume of data that exist. In addition, we are on track to open up 8,000 data sets to the public, which can help food and farming to achieve its potential.

Mr Baker: As a software engineer, I very much welcome my hon. Friend’s response. Does he agree that the implementation burden of vast changes, such as this year’s common agricultural policy, make it difficult to realise all these benefits? Does he agree that there is a simple solution, which is to vote to leave the EU?

George Eustice: As my hon. Friend knows, the Government’s position is that we should remain in the European Union. He will be aware, however, that I have exercised the option granted by the Prime Minister to disagree with the Government on this particular issue. From a personal perspective, I simply say that the vast majority of problems farmers complain to me about are the consequence of dysfunctional EU legislation.

Milk Price

5. Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What progress her Department has made on ensuring that farmers receive a fair price for milk.

8. Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What progress her Department has made on ensuring that farmers receive a fair price for milk.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): These are undoubtedly very difficult times for many dairy farmers. The combination of oversupply around the world coupled with a weakening of demand in major markets such as China has led to a very depressed commodity price. We secured a £26 million support fund last November to alleviate short-term cash-flow pressure. We introduced a dairy supply chain code to improve dealings between dairy processors and farmers. Longer term, we are working on a project to introduce a dairy futures market to help farmers manage future risks. We are exploring the potential to facilitate investment in new dairy processing capacity, so that we can add value to our production.

Cat Smith: A food-secure Britain needs British farmers to be able to make a living. Milk prices plummeted in March this year; they were at their lowest since 2009, with farm-gate prices as low as 16p per litre. This comes at a time when British dairy incomes are dropping; they are forecast to fall by almost half this year. I was disappointed that there was nothing for dairy farmers in this year’s Budget. What action will the Minister take now, working with supermarkets, retailers and farmers, to ensure a future for the British dairy industry?

George Eustice: We have introduced tax-averaging across five years to help farmers who face a tax bill; they can average it against difficult years. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has been clear that it will take a generous approach to the time-to-pay provisions to help farmers who may be under pressure with their tax bill. I completely understand that this is an incredibly difficult time for many farmers. There is a mixed picture: a small number are still on aligned contracts, and still receive a fair price. We constantly meet retailers to try to improve the contracts that they offer, and to encourage them to offer more aligned contracts and to source more dairy production. Many of them are now offering those aligned contracts, or higher prices, to their farmer suppliers.

Liz McInnes: Can the Minister tell the House and Britain’s farmers why the Government failed to support EU efforts to improve the school milk scheme, which provides a valuable market for our struggling dairy farmers? Can he confirm that the Government will roll out the scheme in our schools, and say what benefit it will bring for British farmers?

George Eustice: It is not the case that we did not support the school milk scheme. The European school milk scheme is very small; it is worth around £4 million a year. It is dwarfed by our domestic schemes. The one funded by the Department for Education and the Department of Health, for infants, is around £60 million a year. The issue that we had with the school milk
scheme was the bureaucracy and administration that the European Commission was trying to add to it. We were keen to pare that out, but we certainly supported the scheme; it is not true to say that we did not.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): In north Yorkshire, in the last 15 years, we have lost 50% of our dairy farmers, and 90% of those still in business are losing money, despite generous taxpayer subsidies. Does the Minister agree that now is the time for the supermarkets to start paying British farmers a fair price for British milk?

George Eustice: I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes, and as I say, these are very difficult times for farmers. People often lay the blame on supermarkets, but we have to recognise that at the root of the problem is the worldwide issue of low commodity prices. There are very low prices in New Zealand—far lower than we have here—and many people have been driven out of business there. This is a global challenge. Some of the supermarkets have stepped up to the plate and offered aligned contracts, and many of them are selling their milk at a loss; we should recognise that and give credit where credit is due. Of course, we are always trying to improve the position of farmers in the supply chain.

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): Perhaps there is a win:win here. The hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) made a suggestion about Weetabix; if we advocate having British milk with it, that might offer a little solace. The Minister has spoken about a commitment to strengthening the voluntary code of practice for the dairy sector; when will that be in place?

George Eustice: I have already had this discussion with NFU Scotland, and I have offered to meet it to discuss its concerns. The voluntary code of practice for the dairy industry is GB-wide, as the hon. Gentleman knows, but the reality is that it tends to help farmers more in a rising market, when prices are firming, than in a difficult time in which there is over-supply. The crucial element of it is that it gives farmers the ability to walk away at three months’ notice, and that enables them to extract a better price. That obviously only works when market prices are going up, rather than down, but I have offered to meet NFU Scotland to discuss its concerns. We will review the code again with a view to strengthening and improving it where we can.

Bovine TB

6. Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What progress the Government are making on delivering their strategy to eradicate bovine TB.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The Government are determined to use all available measures necessary to eradicate this devastating disease as quickly as possible. We have continued to make improvements to cattle movement controls, most recently introducing a requirement for post-movement testing of cattle travelling from the high-risk to the low-risk area. At the end of last year, we launched a new project to promote better on-farm biosecurity in order to reduce cattle-to-badger contact. Finally, we also started a cautious roll-out of the badger cull to an additional area in Dorset last year, which was successful.

Fiona Bruce: I thank the Minister for his reply, but I urge the Government to do all they can to ensure that bovine TB is checked in Cheshire so that it does not take further hold. It is the cause of extreme concern to farmers in my constituency.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I recognise the specific challenges in parts of the Cheshire area, notably in Cheshire, and we have therefore introduced much more frequent—six-monthly—testing in Cheshire to get on top of the disease, which has been a success. We have also increased the use of the more sensitive interferon gamma blood test as a supplement to the skin test to ensure that we can remove infected cattle from herds more quickly.

Rural Payments Agency

7. Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the effect on the farming community of delays in payments by the Rural Payments Agency.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): All farmers in England have received their full payment or a bridging payment of half their expected claim. Overall, 90% of eligible farmers have received full payment.

Stephen Phillips: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. I am pretty sure that colleagues with rural constituencies will have numerous examples, as I do, of problems with Rural Payments Agency delays. I wish to raise the particular case of my constituent, Mrs Musson, who has been left in severe financial difficulties this year due to her payment being delayed, and has had extraordinary difficulty contacting the RPA, as far too many farmers do. The response I had from the RPA was that the payment would come “in due course” and that my constituent should call the agency for hardship assistance, yet that is precisely what she has been unable to do. Will the RPA in my right hon. Friend’s constituency or will it make it more easily contactable?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for his question. All eligible farmers should have received a bridging payment by the end of April, and if this is an ongoing issue for his constituent I would be happy to assist directly. This has been the first year of implementation of the new common agricultural policy system. All payments need to be made within the payment window between December and June, and all payments will be made within that window. I appreciate that farmers are struggling with cash flow because of this year’s low commodity prices, which is why we have put in place bridging payments for those final few farmers who have not yet received payments. All that data are now on the system, so 2016 will be much more straightforward and we should be able to pay farmers much earlier in the payment window.
Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for listening to the concerns of farmers in my constituency about basic payments. In order to move forward, can she reassure us of three things: first, that these problems have been heard across the piece; secondly, that solutions such as a dedicated phone line are being considered and sought; and, thirdly, that as we move into the 2016 registration period, the system really will be fit for purpose?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and I would be happy to assist any constituents who have outstanding issues. We have paid more than 90% of farmers, and the payment window ends at the end of June, so all full payments will have been made by then. The data are now on the system, so next year will be much more straightforward. I add that both Wales and Scotland have made fewer full payments than England, and that we are on track to do what needs to be done by the end of June.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips) will know, the farming community of Lincolnshire will be gathering together on 22 and 23 June for the Lincolnshire show. If my right hon. Friend is not doing anything on those particular days and can find time to come to Lincolnshire, I could introduce her to a group of farmers who oppose our membership of the EU. Can she find time in her diary for that?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I could not possibly imagine what anyone might be doing on 23 June. What I would say, on behalf of all farmers, is that the EU and the single market have brought about massive benefits for food and farming. For example, 97% of lamb exports and 92% of beef exports go to the European Union. There would be a real risk to the future livelihood of those industries if we were to leave and were not able to export our fine meat produced in Britain.

Mrs Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): During a very constructive meeting with the Secretary of State, the Church of England’s representatives offered the use of church towers and spires to extend broadband and mobile phone coverage in rural areas. Will the Minister update the House on progress?

Rory Stewart: Church spires are ideally located in remote rural areas to allow point-to-point broadband coverage and good cellular coverage. The offer from the Church Commissioners is greatly appreciated, and we are working closely with our colleagues in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to take advantage of the technological opportunities.

British-produced Meat

10. David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): What steps she is taking to encourage more people to consume meat produced in Britain.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We have some of the best native breeds of cattle, pigs and sheep in the world, and we want to promote quality meat that is produced in the United Kingdom. Because we secured country of origin labelling legislation, such labelling is now mandatory on poultry, pigs and lamb, as well as on beef. Two weeks ago, the Secretary of State was in the United States, working to open the market there for British beef, and I was in Japan making the same case for our top-quality beef to the Japanese Government. We are also exploring ways in which to use the GREAT branding in retail settings to encourage more consumers to choose British products.

David T. C. Davies: I greatly welcome that. I recall that, last November, Parliament was festooned with banners reminding us about something called “vegetarian week”, and urging us to try a vegan meal. In the interests of fairness, may I suggest that we organise a similar event to encourage people to try British meat—perhaps a “British meat May”? If we launch such an event, can we ensure that Opposition Front Benchers are invited as well?
George Eustice: I am sure that my hon. Friend’s suggestion will enjoy cross-party support. He makes the good point that we need to promote our top-quality meat. The Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board also performs an important role. I recently signed off two of its campaigns: a television advertising campaign to promote pulled pork, which is currently running; and a mini-roast television marketing campaign, which is intended to increase consumption of, in particular, underutilised lamb and beef cuts. There is already some very good work going on, but my hon. Friend’s suggestion of a parliamentary event is a useful one, and I shall be happy to explore it with him.

Hedge Maintenance

11. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effect of changes to hedge-cutting regulations on (a) contractors, (b) farms and (c) hedge maintenance.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): We have consulted a range of people on hedge cutting, from the National Farmers Union and the Country Land and Business Association to various environmental organisations, and we have come up with a deal on hedge cutting that provides both protection for birds and derogations for specific agricultural activities.

Tom Pursglove: I thank the Minister for his answer. My constituent, Bob Rutt, is a contractor who specialises in hedge cutting, and the extension of the hedge-trimming ban has cost him thousands of pounds in lost revenue. He has no intention of harming wildlife, but the policy is seriously affecting his business. Will the Minister engage with farmers and contractors to ensure that conditions on the ground are taken into account so that arrangements can work for the contracting industry and conservationists?

Rory Stewart: I am happy to engage with my hon. Friend and indeed farmers on this issue. It is important to understand, however, that certain birds, including blackbirds, turtle doves, goldfinches, bullfinches and whitethroats, have longer breeding and rearing seasons that last through August and into the beginning of September. There are two specific derogations that could affect my hon. Friend: one relates to the planting of oilseed rape; and the other relates to seasonal grass, which allows him to get his equipment in, in accordance with agricultural practices. I am happy to discuss the details with my hon. Friend. Friend.

Mr Speaker: The Minister is a veritable mine of information, is he not? We are deeply obliged to him, as I dare say the constituent of the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Tom Pursglove) will be, to boot.

Brexit

12. Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the potential effect on the agricultural sector of the UK leaving the European Union.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): I can tell the hon. Gentleman that 60% of our food and drink exports go to the EU—that is worth £11 billion to our economy. That is vital income for our farmers and fishermen. If we were to leave, exporters would face crippling tariffs when selling their goods to Europe, such as up to 70% for beef products, which would cost £240 million per year.

Nic Dakin: I agree with the Secretary of State, the National Farmers Union and the Food and Drink Federation about how vital the EU is to our farming industry. The Secretary of State has given quite a full answer, but would she like to put a figure on what the lost trade would cost our farmers each year if we were to leave the single market?

Elizabeth Truss: What we know is that no country that is not a full member of the EU has full access to the agricultural market. Whether it is Norway, Canada or any other of the countries whose models the out campaign have talked about, none of them has full access without quotas or tariffs. I have given the example of beef, with a cost of £240 million a year. The sheep industry would be even harder hit because 40% of all the sheep that we produce here in the UK are exported to the EU.

Topical Questions

T1. Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): The Government are taking action to help farmers to manage low prices and market volatility, which is why we have ensured that all eligible farmers have now been paid their full basic payment or a bridging payment for 2015. To help farmers in the future, we have extended the period of tax-averaging from two to five years, and this month I am convening farmers, food producers and the European Investment Bank to seek further investment in improved productivity and processing capacity.

Liz McInnes: I thank the Secretary of State for her response. Can she confirm that any grant money from the EU solidarity fund will be additional money to be spent in the communities that have been affected by floods, and that it will not be swallowed up by the Treasury as payback for money already spent?

Elizabeth Truss: I can confirm that that is additional money that is being applied for through my colleague, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.

T2. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): In a written answer to me today, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), has told me that restaurants in England are encouraged to show their hygiene scores on their doors. However, the truth is that those that have a very low score—one or two out of five—do not display their scores. In Wales, it is mandatory to show hygiene scores on the doors. What can my right hon.
Friend do to encourage the Department of Health to make it mandatory, as it is in Wales, to show scores on the doors? This practice has been shown to raise hygiene standards in restaurants in Wales.

Elizabeth Truss: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his campaign. Food safety standards are one of the reasons why British food is so respected around the world, and our exports are growing because people respect the work of the Food Standards Agency. It is important for consumer confidence that we have transparency in the safety of food, and I look forward to hearing more about my hon. Friend’s discussions with the Department of Health.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that our largely foreign-owned water companies made £2.1 billion profit in 2014-15 and paid out £1.8 billion in dividends, but fell well short of paying full corporation tax. She will also be aware of the complicated structures that the companies operate, which can bamboozle us all. Does she agree that the expected water Bill to introduce competition into the domestic market could be used to ensure that companies are more open and transparent, and pay more tax in the UK?

Elizabeth Truss: We are introducing further measures to improve competition in the water industry and to carry on driving efficiencies. Under the Labour Government, water bills rose by 20%, whereas Ofwat’s most recent decision will lead to a fall of 5% in customers’ water bills.

Alex Cunningham: I had hoped that the Secretary of State would have proved a greater water, consumer and taxpayer champion, so I will give her a second chance. Water UK, which represents the water companies, told the weekend media:

“Water companies are also providing more help than ever before for customers in vulnerable circumstances including social tariffs and other schemes to reduce bills.”

She will know, as I do, that such schemes are arbitrary and variable. Does she agree that the next water Bill could provide an opportunity to introduce a fair scheme for all vulnerable customers?

Elizabeth Truss: More social tariffs are being introduced right across the country, but the key point is that everybody is seeing a reduction in their water bills overall, because we have a good regulator and an efficient industry, and we are introducing further competition.

T4. [904814] Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Dairy farmers are suffering due to low prices—there is a lot of milk in the market. One of the markets that we still cannot get into is Russia. What is happening? Is there any chance that we can get back into that market? European and British dairy farmers are paying a high price for the ban on exports to Russia.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): My hon. Friend makes the important point that the Russian trade embargo has exacerbated the challenges facing the dairy sector and others, such as the pig sector. However, we put in place sanctions against Russia because of its totally unacceptable conduct against Ukraine and its incursions into Ukrainian territory. It is important that we show solidarity with other European countries and do not accept how Russia has behaved towards Ukraine.

T3. [904812] Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): We have already heard about the £1.6 billion profits of water companies and their £1.8 billion payout to shareholders. They are rich organisations, and some, to their credit, are already living wage accredited. Does the Secretary of State therefore back Unison’s campaign for the current living wage to be paid throughout the industry?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): We have to tackle such issues directly with Ofwat. As the hon. Gentleman will know, it is extremely important for the industry to ensure that there is a predictable future in which politicians are not micromanaging. We are going through a price review process and dealing closely with Ofwat, but we must ensure that neither I nor the Secretary of State try to micromanage an independent regulator from the Dispatch Box.

T5. [904816] Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The recent Groceries Code Adjudicator report showed that Tesco breached the code of practice by delaying payments to suppliers and demanding extra fees, which has been raised with me by farmers in my constituency. What are the Government doing to ensure that further such breaches do not occur?

George Eustice: As my hon. Friend will be aware, we introduced regulations at the end of the previous Parliament to make it possible for the Groceries Code Adjudicator to levy fines against retailers that breach the code. The action that she took against Tesco was evidence that that is starting to work, and that she is beginning to pick up on and deal with bad practice. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills will shortly be leading a review of the role of and our approach to the Groceries Code Adjudicator. As part of that, we will be looking at ways in which we might be able to improve the code.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Recently, two of my constituents were sentenced to just six months’ electronic tagging for the brutal and horrific abuse of their pet bulldog. The community has been rightly outraged by the leniency of the sentence, because these people also videoed the abuse and were laughing as they carried it out. The dog was subsequently put down. I have written to the Secretary of State for Justice, but may I ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to chase up my letter and to review animal sentencing, given that the maximum sentence for animal cruelty is just one year?

George Eustice: We have looked at the issue of animal sentencing; there can be an unlimited fine, and my understanding is that the sentence can be up to five years for animal cruelty. I will check that point and write to the hon. Lady if that is incorrect. The evidence shows that for most offences the courts are not using the maximum sentence, so we do not believe there is a case for changing it. We have looked at the issue of fighting dogs and organised dog fights, where there is...
some evidence that the courts are restricted by current sentencing guidelines. The hon. Lady will be aware that this is an issue for the Ministry of Justice, and I am sure that its Ministers will want to discuss it with her.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): As a keen rambler himself, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), will be familiar with the coast-to-coast walk, which runs across both our constituencies. It is one of England's most popular long-distance walks, yet it is not an official national trail. Will he meet me to discuss my campaign to give the coast-to-coast the formal recognition it deserves?

Rory Stewart: I would be absolutely delighted to meet my hon. Friend, and in fact I propose that we meet by walking the national trail together.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): There is growing concern about the environmental impact of microbeads, the tiny pieces of plastic that are found in many consumer products and are now swilling around in our oceans. The Americans and Canadians are moving to ban them. What are the UK Government doing?

Rory Stewart: We are very clear that microbeads potentially pose a serious threat, because the stuff does not biodegrade and it can collect toxic material. We have run a research programme and have been working very hard to make sure that the full 500 million members of the European Union sign up to a common position, but if we cannot get a common position out of the EU, we are open to the possibility of the United Kingdom acting unilaterally.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): Part of the fantastically successful national forest falls in my constituency. Its benefits to the community are clear, as are those of woodlands and trees more broadly to the community and to air quality. What steps are the Government taking to encourage the planting of more trees across the UK, building on their success to date?

Rory Stewart: I had the privilege of being in the national forest, and I can tell any Members who have not seen it that it is an extraordinary project, found between Leicester, Nottingham and Derby. It has regenerated 200 square miles of brutalised countryside and created one of the great new forests in Britain. We will be looking at taking forward ideas like that in the 25-year plan, and of course we are committed, as a minimum, to planting another 11 million trees between now and 2020.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State please tell the House when the Government will deliver on their promise to ban wild animals in circuses?

Elizabeth Truss: That is a manifesto commitment and I can reassure the hon. Lady that we are committed to doing it.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Log-burning stoves are one of the pleasures of living in the countryside and for more fashion-conscious townies. They tend to be produced by family-owned businesses, almost all of which are in rural areas in the UK. The industry is very concerned that this great way of life and tradition might be under threat because the stoves are needlessly brought into air-quality regulations. For the sake of everyone who enjoys them and for everyone who manufactures them in rural areas, will the Minister meet the industry to try to protect them?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his question; we certainly would be very happy to meet the industry to discuss that issue. I am absolutely clear that making sure we have cleaner air is a vital priority for this Government.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Same Sex Marriage: Clergy

1. Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What discussions the Church Commissioners have had with the Church of England on supporting clergy who have entered into same sex marriages or civil partnerships.

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Mrs Caroline Spelman): I should first declare my personal position, which is that I voted in favour of same sex marriage when the decision was before Parliament, but I do recognise that it is difficult for the Anglican Church. The Anglican Communion extends over many different cultures and many continents, and not all cultures and societies move at the same pace. It is therefore all the more remarkable that the Archbishop of Canterbury managed to get a unanimous agreement among all the bishops of the Anglican Communion, in Canterbury, in January, that there should be a new doctrine condemning homophobic prejudice and violence, and resolving “to work together to offer pastoral care and loving service irrespective of sexual orientation.”

Cat Smith: I thank the right hon. Lady for her answer. She will be aware that many people feel called to ministry, including, naturally, many people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. Although Church of England policies protect heterosexual couples if they are in a marriage by not taking their status into account when it comes to jobs within the Church, the same is not true for those who have entered same sex marriages. Is she aware of cases of written permission from bishops placed on file, and of refusals to issue licences when new positions are sought, including even secular positions? Will she do her best to ensure that LGBT clergy are not discriminated against here in the Church of England?

Mrs Spelman: As I mentioned, the Anglican Communion is extremely diverse. What we must remember, living here in the liberal west, is that a typical Anglican communicant is in Africa and black, female and under 35; in many African nations there are also very strong views on this subject, and keeping the Communion together is a big challenge. It is open to Church of
England clergy to enter into civil partnerships, and many do so. The Church of England in England is moving forward in its understanding with a shared conversation, three parts of which have already occurred. In July this year, the Synod will move forward with the shared conversation about sexuality—the nature of human sexuality. I reiterate the point that the whole Communion agreed unanimously that the Church should never, by its actions, give any impression other than that every human being is the same in God's sight regardless of sexuality.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The Dean of Lichfield cathedral, Adrian Dorber, is always telling me how short of money the cathedral is. May I just say that I live for the day when gay clergymen can be openly gay and there will be gay marriages, which will be paid for in Lichfield cathedral and all the other cathedrals in England and the rest of the United Kingdom, in a liberal nation.

Mrs Spelman: I look forward to visiting the Lichfield diocese. Indeed, the Government have been very generous in their funding for repairs to that beautiful cathedral. On the specific subject of human sexuality, I do not think that the Archbishop of Canterbury could have been clearer about his leadership in bringing the whole Anglican Communion together for the first time, united behind the doctrine that we should condemn homophobic prejudice and violence at home and abroad.

Mr Speaker: I call Sir David Amess—not here.

Near Neighbours Programme

3. Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What progress has been made on the Near Neighbours programme.

4. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What discussions the Church Commissioners have had with Christian communities in Iraq on the future of those communities. [904803]

5. Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What discussions the Church Commissioners have had with Christian communities in Iraq on the future of those communities. [904806]

Mrs Spelman: In March, the Bishops of Coventry, Leeds and Southwark, who play a leading role for the Church on international development issues, travelled with Christian Aid to Iraqi Kurdistan, where they met internally displaced people from Iraq and refugees from Syria, and saw at first hand the pressures that Christians in those communities suffer.

Nigel Huddleston: I appreciate the good work that the Church Commissioners are doing with the Christian communities in Iraq. What role are they playing in communicating the outcome of those discussions back to Government, and indeed congregations in the UK, and is there more that concerned Christians in my constituency can do to show the strength of feeling on that important issue?

Mrs Spelman: Yes, immediately upon their return the bishops, with their first-hand knowledge, wrote to the Foreign Office, drawing its attention to the persecution suffered by the Christians in those countries. In order to inform our congregations, many of us have Church-based non-governmental organisations who have produced excellent briefing documents, which are shared with parishes up and down the country so that they can pray in an informed way. I have written to the Foreign Office about what is effectively genocide, particularly of the Yazidi community, and I recommend other like-minded Members of Parliament to do the same.

Fiona Bruce: Persecution of Christians is an increasingly worldwide concern. I recently hosted the launch by Open Doors of its report on northern Nigeria—I visited Nigeria with the International Development Committee just a few weeks ago. The report, entitled “Crushed but not defeated”, outlines how more than 1 million Christians have been affected by targeting, discriminatory practices and violence, including by Boko Haram. Does the right hon. Lady agree that it is crucial that the whole international community helps to address this, to restore reconciliation in communities there?

Mrs Spelman: Yes, we are all familiar with the terrible pictures from northern Nigeria. When the Archbishop of Canterbury convened representatives of the middle
east Churches, he actually spoke at a prayer vigil, where he highlighted that this is a moment for such evil to be brought to an end. He said:

"It must stop...If it does not stop...in...places around the world, such as northern Nigeria...it will continue to spread."

The Church is well aware, as I am sure we all are, of the need to make a stand against this evil, so that it does not spread further.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I spent several years as special envoy on human rights to Iraq, so I met many of the beleaguered minority religions of Iraq. I hope that the Church Commissioners will look at the plight of all of them—the Mandaeans, the Yazidis and the Turkmen, to mention just a few. Will the right hon. Lady pay particular tribute to Canon Andrew White, who was known as the Bishop of Baghdad for his work over the many years that he spent in the country, attempting to bring all the warring sides together?

Mrs Spelman: The position of the Church of England is indeed to speak up for all religious minorities where they have been persecuted in that region, and those Church representatives could not have put it better in stating that the region is “in desperate danger of losing an irreplaceable part of its identity, heritage and culture” in all those religious minorities. The hon. Lady is right: Canon Andrew White has done a remarkable job speaking up for the plight of the Christians in the region. I am regularly in receipt of his email and I recommend that other Members of the House who are interested in the subject read his emails.

Apprenticeship Levy

5. Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): Whether the Church Commissioners have made an assessment of the effect of the apprenticeship levy on the Church of England.

Mrs Spelman: The Church of England supports the Government’s drive to increase the number of apprentices. Apart from some of the central bodies and larger diocesan offices in cathedrals, most Church bodies will not be affected by the levy, because their payrolls fall below the £3 million threshold, but the Church is in the rather unusual position of having 8,000 office holders out of its total 24,000 employees, and the Church would very much like to see the levy being used to train more ordinands.

Mark Spencer: May I push my right hon. Friend to expand a little more on that unusual position? Clearly, those office holders are not employees. How does that affect their situation?

Mrs Spelman: In a way, the Church is an anomaly. Quite a lot of organisations have office holders—unless I am much mistaken, MPs are technically office holders—but every vicar in every parish is not in a position to employ an apprentice. Indeed, having a curate is quite a luxury, as it takes so much to train people. I hope the Government will support the Church’s quest to use some of the moneys from the apprenticeship levy to meet its shortfall of approximately 40,000 ordinands.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): My right hon. Friend highlighted the shortage of clergy for parishes, and it is important that the apprenticeship levy does not compound that situation. Does she agree that it is also important that it is not compounded by an enforced retirement age for clergy who are able and willing to continue serving their parishes where there would often be a long interregnum otherwise? Will she take this matter up with the Church Commissioners?

Mrs Spelman: I expect all of us have met or been ministered to by a wise elderly priest, but the statutory retirement age for clergy is 70. Exceptions can be made. Although that is officially the retirement age, clergy may be given permission by the bishop to continue to officiate. A team vicar may have their term extended by two years, and a further extension may be achieved by a fixed-term licence, particularly in a diocese where there is special pastoral need. So there are ways in which exceptionally able clergy can continue to serve beyond the age of 70.

ExxonMobil: Climate Change Policies

6. David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): What the purpose is of the resolution co-filed by the Church Commissioners to commission ExxonMobil to carry out an impact assessment on the effect of climate change policies on that company’s portfolio and strategy.

Mrs Spelman: The Commissioners have co-filed a resolution with the New York State Common Retirement Fund so that ExxonMobil’s shareholders can indicate to the company their wish to see better corporate reporting on the long-term risks that the transition to a low-carbon economy presents to Exxon. This includes a scenario in which the implementation of the Paris agreement restricts warming to below 2°C.

David T. C. Davies: Before they are too critical of the oil companies, may I suggest that the Church of England Commissioners read the Bible—Matthew 25, the parable of the oil lamps and the 10 virgins—and remember that it was the five virgins who lived happily ever after and who had a cheap and ready supply of this much-maligned fossil fuel?

Mrs Spelman: My hon. Friend and I perhaps do not share the same interpretation of the Bible when it comes to belief in climate change as a phenomenon. When I shortly visit the diocese of the Arctic, I shall have very much in mind the recent news that the British research station is in danger of sinking into the sea, as was shown in a documentary on television last night. Will my hon. Friend recognise that the Church Commissioners have been commended with a number of prizes for their work on an ethical investment strategy, which includes taking account of the risks that climate change poses to investments?
Business of the House

10.32 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week, please?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling):
The business for next week is as follows:

Monday 9 May—Debate on a motion relating to BIS Sheffield proposal and Government Departments outside London. The subject for this debate was recommended by the Backbench Business Committee, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Energy Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Housing and Planning Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Immigration Bill.

Tuesday 10 May—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by business to be recommended by the Backbench Business Committee.

Wednesday 11 May—Consideration of Lords amendments, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Armed Forces Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by business to be recommended by the Backbench Business Committee, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

Thursday 12 May—Consideration of Lords amendments.

The House will be prorogued when Royal Assent to all Acts has been signified.

I should inform the House that Ministers will provide a quarterly update on Syria before Prorogation.

Chris Bryant: Talk of the fag end of a parliamentary session, the business the Leader has just announced is the sludgy, slimy, foul-smelling, trashy, ych a fdregs of politics.

Yesterday’s Prime Minister’s questions showed me, if nobody else, that there ain’t no gutter low enough for the Prime Minister to slop around in. That kind of despicable smearing of one’s opponents degrades the whole of politics, and I would gently say to the Government that those who live by the gutter die in the gutter. I am absolutely certain that that kind of politics is not welcome to British voters.

What a year it has been! Every single economic target missed. Growth forecasts constantly downgraded. Debt up. Homelessness up. The use of food banks up by 19%. Absolute child poverty set to rise. NHS waiting lists up. Libraries closed. Net migration higher than it has ever been. There has been one Budget in which the Chancellor attacked working tax credits, and another in which he attacked welfare payments. Morale at rock bottom—in the NHS, the teaching profession and the police. Election rules bent to benefit the Tories in this House. The subject for this debate was recommended by the Backbench Business Committee, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Energy Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Housing and Planning Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Immigration Bill.

You can tell state opening is coming. The awnings are going up outside the Lords. The Doorkeepers have been rubbing up their brasses. Countesses have been brushing off their tiaras. The Clerk has had a haircut—you cannot tell, but underneath his wig, he has had a haircut. And I gather you have even had your annual bath, Mr Speaker. [Interruption.] I don’t do that mock outraged look, it doesn’t suit you. Could we introduce an innovation this year at state opening? I know the Leader of the House does not want to listen to the President of the United States of America, but could we have a roll-call of ambassadors and high commissioners, just to check which of our allies want us to stay in the European Union? So far as I can see, they include not just our oldest ally, Portugal, and every other EU country, but the Commonwealth countries of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa, and doubtless many more. Who knows, perhaps we will be adding Japan later today and of course Norway—so the Norwegian model is that we should stay in. The only international figure who wants us to leave is Donald Trump—Grayling with a hairpiece. How on earth can the Leader of the House argue that we would increase our influence in the world by leaving the European Union?

May we have a debate about the BBC? The Culture Secretary says he relishes the demise of the BBC. He wants to ban “Strictly” and “The Voice” and to force the BBC to make deliberately unpopular programmes. He has even said that if he does not renew the BBC charter by the end of this year, “it may be that the BBC will cease to exist”—something he calls “a tempting prospect.” Now, I do not want to get into the Culture Secretary’s temptations, but when will Ministers get it into their fat heads that the British people love the BBC? They are proud of it and see it as our greatest cultural institution, and they do not want some right-wing Minister pursuing a personal agenda and handing British broadcasting over lock, stock and barrel to his chum Murdoch. Will the Government publish the White Paper next week, stand by the financial deal they signed up to with the BBC last year and guarantee that there will be a new 11-year BBC charter in place this autumn?

In recent years, some of the most destructively powerful people in the land have done their level best to avoid appearing before Select Committees of this House. The Maxwells, Rebekah Brooks, Rupert and James Murdoch, Philip Green, Matthew Elliott—they all initially refused to attend and had to be formally summoned or persuaded to attend. Irene Rosenfeld, chief executive of Kraft Foods, point-blank refused to appear to discuss the takeover of Cadbury and got away with it. Surely that is not just a clear contempt of Parliament, but a contempt of the British public as well. Our constituents want us to hold the powerful to account, and we should not be shy of doing so. Some people think our powers are unclear, and witnesses are beginning to call our bluff, so...
we have to do something. In 2013, the Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege recommended changes to Standing Orders to make it absolutely clear that Parliament can arrest, punish and fine offenders, saying that “if the problems we have identified...are not resolved...today’s Parliament should stand ready to legislate”.

The Committee said that doing nothing was not an option, but that is exactly what the Government have done—absolutely nothing. So surely it is time for us to make it a criminal offence to fail to appear or refuse to appear without reasonable excuse before a Committee of this House.

The mayoral election ends today, so will we finally now get a decision on Heathrow? In the words of Bucks Fizz in their epic Eurovision-winning number, “Making Your Mind Up”, just before they so memorably tore off their skirts,

“Don’t let your indecision
Take you from behind.
Trust your inner vision
Don’t let others change your mind.”

Incidentally, good luck to Joe and Jake next week—let us hope the UK agrees with them that “You’re Not Alone” in the European referendum on 23 June.

Chris Grayling: May I start, Mr Speaker, by congratulating you on your indulgence and your patience? I am sure you have powers that would enable you to take much more robust action against comments such as the ones we have just heard.

What a load of twaddle we just heard from the shadow Leader of the House. Let us be clear: we have spent the past 12 months fulfilling the trust that the public put in us at the general election last year when we defeated the Labour party. Let us look at the things that this Government have done. We have introduced new powers to turn around failing schools. We have paved the way for the northern powerhouse. We have passed the European Union Referendum Act 2015. We have provided substantial new powers of devolution to Scotland. We have paved the way for the national living wage. We have passed English votes for English laws. We have passed a childcare Act that doubles the amount of free childcare each week. We have taken further important steps to consolidate peace in Northern Ireland. These are real achievements that Government Members are proud of.

The hon. Gentleman talks about a one nation party. I am proud to be part of a Government who have seen unemployment fall to its lowest levels since the 1970s. It is worth remembering that there has never yet been a Labour Government who left office with unemployment lower than it was when they started. I am also proud that we are living in a nation where we now have more than half a million fewer children growing up in workless households than there were in 2010—a legacy of poverty that we inherited from the previous Government and that we are turning around.

The hon. Gentleman talks about the language of politics. I hear the language of politics on the Opposition Benches as Labour Members fight like ferrets in a sack, desperately working out how to deal with their leadership crisis and trying to deal with the endemic problem of anti-Semitism in their party.

It is worth saying today that this week marks the 37th anniversary of a great step forward in equality in our society: the moment we elected our first woman Prime Minister. I am sure that everyone, even the shadow Leader of the House, would agree that that was a really crucial moment in our political history that we should mark unreservedly.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the BBC. Once again, he is making the mistake that I am surprised he does make of always believing everything he reads in the papers. He needs to wait for the White Paper on the BBC, which will be brought before the House shortly. He and his colleagues will have the opportunity to question that White Paper when it appears, but I say simply that Conservative Members expect the BBC to have a strong future in this country.

The hon. Gentleman made a serious point—among others—about attending Select Committees. On this point, he and I do agree. It is essential for the workings of this House that if people are summoned to appear before a Select Committee, they do so. I am very happy that in the new Session we hold cross-party discussions on how we ensure that happens.

The hon. Gentleman asked about Heathrow. I am surprised, because Labour Members have been raising issues about air quality, and the reason we are taking time over the airport decision is precisely to address air quality and NOx emissions around Heathrow. If they were in government, they would be doing exactly the same thing.

As the hon. Gentleman said, today is of course local election day. There are not just local elections—we have mayoral elections and police and crime commissioner elections. I think we should send our thanks from this House to everyone involved in those elections—the officials, the counting agents and the police, as well as every participant, regardless of their political persuasion, because without them putting their heads above the parapet to stand for election we would not have a democracy in this country. Obviously, I want Conservatives to win. We will watch with great interest, though, after the Labour leader said that he was going to lose no seats at all at these local elections, to see whether his forecast is fulfilled. The next few days will be big ones for the shadow Leader of the House, because we know how much disquiet there is among Labour Members about the leader of their party. Members of the Shadow Front-Bench team are seriously considering quitting over the next few days because of their despair about their leader.

The shadow Leader of the House has other targets in mind. He has a campaign group set up, and he has been courting support from Conservative Members for his plan in due course, when you decide to hang up your hat, Mr Speaker, to take over from you. If he has a different goal, if his Front-Bench position does not matter to him and if he really does not approve of his party leader, will he join those who are looking to put principle before career in the next few days and resign after these elections?
Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend consider allowing a short debate on the Government’s 2014 review of sections 135 and 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983? I raise the matter because I am particularly concerned about the application of section 136 in private premises, where the ability of the police to intervene for the safety of a disturbed individual, even in an emergency, is pitifully limited.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The issue of mental health causes concern on both sides of the House, and I will make sure that the Health Secretary is aware of the comments that he has made. We have Health questions next week, and I am happy to make sure that the Health Secretary is aware of the matter. It is also a matter for the Home Secretary, and I will make sure that she is aware of the concerns that my hon. Friend has raised.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing what amounts to, and what is left of, next week’s business. It is great to have such overwhelming support from my Scottish National party colleagues, who are, of course, in Scotland fighting to ensure that we get an unprecedented third term of SNP Government, and that we get a majority SNP Government in a Parliament that is designed to ensure that that prospect does not happen. I echo the thanks of the Leader of the House to all who are involved in today’s elections, and I congratulate them on the efforts they are making.

Our attention now turns to what will happen once the elections are concluded. It is hard to believe, but the Conservatives have been quite constrained, thus far, to try to ensure that they get the best possible result today. After today, I see the prospect of them tearing lumps out of each other. Friendships forged in the playground of Eton will amount to nothing as they get oiled up for this gladiatorial contest. It is going to be the greatest Tory show on earth. Perhaps we should look at getting in the peacekeepers, because Labour’s result tomorrow will result in them tearing lumps out of each other, too.

We need an urgent statement on what is going on with the investigation of the Conservative party for breaking campaign spending rules in last year’s general election. The claims are absolutely extraordinary, and they centre around 28 Conservative candidates failing to register the use of a battle bus for local campaigning and some £38,000 of accommodation for local campaigns. If anybody is found guilty of such a charge, they could face one year’s imprisonment and an unlimited fine. Surely, we must hear the Government’s view on that. There must be no whiff of a suggestion that this Government cheated their way to power.

I think that we in this House all welcome the apparent U-turn on child refugees made by the Prime Minister yesterday in response to sustained questioning from my right hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson). It would be useful, however, to know whether the Government intend to accept the Dubs amendment on Monday without any amendment of their own. It would be good if the Leader of the House announced that today, so that the nation knows whether the Government are going to do the right thing.

Finally, it is worth while, as the Labour shadow Leader of the House said, acknowledging what has happened with our business this year. The biggest innovation in the workings of the House has been English votes for English laws: something so divisive, so useless and so incomprehensible has defined Parliament in the last Session. As we go into the next Session of Parliament, an urgent review is very much required, and I seriously hope that English votes for English laws will be hopelessly consigned to the dustbin of history and that we will become a House that has one class of Member once again.

Chris Grayling: I echo the hon. Gentleman’s comments about the election in Scotland, and my comments about those who are involved in today’s elections very much extend to those involved in Scotland. We should be grateful to everyone who works hard to make these elections a success. I have a sneaking suspicion that he and I have a shared interest in today’s elections in Scotland, because we both want the Labour party to do badly. I am confident that under the leadership of Ruth Davidson we have every chance of consigning the Labour party in Scotland to third place—frankly, that is where it belongs.

The hon. Gentleman talked about civil war within political parties, but I am afraid he is looking in the wrong direction. It is very clear that, even though the shadow Leader of the House will not put principle before career, many of his Front-Bench colleagues are clearly profoundly unhappy with their party leader. I expect to see all kinds of trouble in the Labour party after the elections, which the hon. Gentleman and I will both watch with interest. He will not see anything like that among Members on our Benches, because the hostility existing between people in the same party in this House is all to be found on the Labour Benches.

On the issues relating to electoral and other activities, I simply remind the hon. Gentleman that it is for the proper authorities to address such issues whenever they arise. I have been very careful to say that that is the case when those issues have affected the Scottish nationalists, as we have seen in recent months. On the subject of child refugees, the Prime Minister set out our position very clearly during Prime Minister’s questions yesterday.

On English votes for English laws, we have had this debate many times over recent months, but I simply remind the hon. Gentleman that people in Scotland are today electing a new Administration that will have more power to govern Scotland than ever before. It is for the SNP to decide how to use those powers if it is successful in today’s elections. I think the Scottish nationalists will find it is much tougher than they expect to take real decisions, rather than simply to talk about things. We stand by our view that it is right and proper to ensure that England has a share in the devolution settlement as well, and that is what we have done.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): May we have a debate in this place so that we can be truly obnoxious and rude about the debacle of connecting Devon and Somerset with broadband? It has been an absolute fiasco. The two people who have caused the most trouble—the Laurel and Hardy of this entire affair—are John Hart and Peter Doyle. It is beyond a joke: they are just not connecting Devon and Somerset. May we have a chance to vent our spleen in
Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes his point very succinctly, as is his customary style when he faces challenges in his constituency. He brings a certain panache to his role as the Member of Parliament for Bridgwater and West Somerset, and I commend him for it.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. Members will have noted that time has been allocated for Backbench Business Committee debates on both Tuesday and Wednesday. Because of the uncertainty of the timing of business for next week, the Backbench Business Committee has had to make contingency plans.

We have prioritised outstanding applications for the remainder of the Session for 10 and 11 May, when we hope to secure debates on the effect of the implementation of universal credit on children and on the frozen pensions of UK pension recipients residing abroad. Which debate will be on which day is a matter for negotiation with the primary sponsors of the applications for those debates, but we hope to be able to inform the House about that as soon as possible.

May I thank the Clerk and the support staff of the Backbench Business Committee for their professionalism, patience and, in my case, humour in our dealings with them in the past year and during this Session?

Chris Grayling: As we near the end of the Session, it is appropriate to thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for the work he has done over the past few months and, indeed, to thank the other members of the Committee for their work. It is also appropriate for me to express my good wishes, because I know that this is a tense and nervous time for the hon. Gentleman. There are a few days left before he learns the truth, but we will keep our fingers crossed. His team is just above the relegation zone, and I am sure he will keep fingers firmly crossed, although perhaps not quite in the same way as his colleague, the former shadow Chancellor, will be doing over in Norwich. It will be a tense few days.

I echo the points that the hon. Gentleman made. I very much hope that, over the coming Session, he will see greater participation by Members in bringing forward ideas for debates. I know that, on occasion, not as many subjects for debate have been suggested as the Committee would wish. My message to the House as a whole is that this involves a large slice of parliamentary time and our local government elections are working.

May I also take this opportunity to thank both the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House for the way in which they have conducted business
be countenancing the idea that a number of other Labour Members will not be here in the future. Perhaps that is what will happen under their current leader.

On the issue of the counting of the right hon. Lady’s vote, it is never acceptable for any Member’s vote not to be counted. Of course mistakes sometimes happen, but I am sure you have listened to her point, Mr Speaker. Within the rules of the House, everyone participates in all Divisions that take place except those in the Legislative Grand Committees.

I have to say that not only do I disagree with what the right hon. Lady said about child refugees, but her actual comments are deeply disparaging to those working in the camps in and around Syria, supported by British money, to help bring refugees from those camps to the United Kingdom. We are doing more than virtually any other country in the world to provide support to those refugees. She should be proud of that.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): A criminal in Bradford—who was, incidentally, out on licence from a four and a half year prison sentence—evaded arrest by throwing acid in the face of a police officer and was given only a 20-month sentence for that assault, to the understandable disgust of the Police Federation. That was not, in my view, the fault of the judge, who did his best within the sentencing guidelines. Assaults on police officers and other public servants are aggravating factors in sentencing, but no guidance is given as to how much longer a sentence should be for such an assault. May we have a debate on the topic, so that we can consider the length of sentence that should be added in the case of aggravating factors such as assaults on police officers and other public servants, so that they are treated as seriously as they should be by the courts and so that public servants are given the protection that they deserve?

Chris Grayling: I echo the hon. Gentleman’s comments about Leicester City’s extraordinary achievement, which will live in the annals of sport in this country for a long time to come. Of course, we will all be cheering them on in the champions league next year. It is also appropriate to express our congratulations and condolences to Tottenham Hotspur. At the start of the season, nobody would have expected the top two in the premier league to be Leicester and Tottenham Hotspur.

The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about premier league prices. I commend those clubs that are trying to make cheaper tickets available to young people. It is of paramount importance that in today’s world football is a family occasion in a way that it was not perhaps a generation ago. If we look back to the terrible events at Hillsborough that were described in the House a few days ago, we can see that it was a different world. Football has become a much more family-friendly and open place. We would not want that to change because of high prices.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): May we have a debate on the future of the UK’s military partnerships? NATO has been the cornerstone of our defence since 1949 and has helped to keep the peace in Europe, but now Germany and other members of the European Union want an EU army.

Chris Grayling: That question gives me an opportunity to speak for both the Government and the leave campaign, which—as people know—I support. It is everyone’s view on both sides in the Government—and I would hope on the other side of the Chamber too—that we do not want the creation of a European army, or our armed forces subsumed into such an army. That is a uniting factor on our side of the House.

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Given the seriousness of the election fraud allegations made by Channel 4, the Leader of the House’s response to my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) was just not good enough. Does the Leader of the House not agree that it is incumbent on the Government to take action and work with any investigation, police or otherwise—and if there is none, to instigate one—especially as the allegations have been made against the party in government?

Chris Grayling: I simply repeat my earlier point: when allegations are made, there are proper authorities to investigate them.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): There seems to be some confusion out in the country about whether people need to re-register to vote in the EU referendum on 23 June. I would of course never seek to pass comment on these matters, but I have been led to believe that some of this confusion is emanating from the Government’s pro-EU propaganda. May we have a statement next week to put this matter beyond doubt and clarify the situation?

Chris Grayling: Let me set the matter completely straight today: anyone who is currently on the electoral roll does not need to re-register for the referendum.
**Simon Danczuk** (Rochdale) (Ind): A Kent firm has bought the profitable community pub, the Bull’s Head in Rochdale. Behind the backs of the landlord, landlady and regulars, it is now trying to turn it into a veterinary surgery. I accept the Government have done some good work to protect pubs, but perhaps we need a debate on whether planning powers need strengthening further to protect excellent pubs like the Bull’s Head.

**Chris Grayling:** Our changes to planning laws have given local authorities greater control. I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point: we have seen a distressingly large number of pubs disappear around the country. Local authorities and local communities have greater powers than they did. I share his view that it is a great shame if a much loved local pub disappears. One hopes that that does not continue in this country; we have lost too many already.

**Calum Kerr** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): The Scottish National party manifesto for today’s Scottish Parliament election commits to examining the feasibility of extending the Borders railway, which was opened last year and has proved to be a huge success. I support its extension to Hawick and Carlisle. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on this matter, so that we can hear and discuss how the UK Government would propose to support such a significant and exciting national infrastructure project?

**Chris Grayling:** The new Administration in Scotland, whatever their political persuasion, will be able to pursue devolved matters, including transport. If the line crosses the border into England, I have no doubt that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport will wish to discuss carefully and constructively with the new Scottish Administration how we can ensure that the route is completed.

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): May we have a debate on the future of the Crown post office network—Post Office Ltd is looking to franchise 39 of the Crown post offices, including Lancaster in my constituency—and the relationship MPs have with Post Office Ltd? Many MPs will agree that they have found Post Office Ltd difficult to work with and to get clear answers from.

**Chris Grayling:** I am sure the hon. Lady’s comments will be noted by the Post Office. It has been through big changes in this Parliament, but we have now finally reached a point where it is much less of a drain on the public purse, and we can spend the money on other priorities. I understand the point she makes, but it is in all our interests in today’s world to spend money where it will be most useful.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): Last week, we had a 60-minute debate in Westminster Hall on East Anglian devolution. It was massively oversubscribed, reflecting the unhappiness of Members across the House about what has been going on. I suspect we would find similar disquiet in other parts of the country. Thousands of people are standing for election to local councils today. A complete constitutional mess is being created in this country. Will the Leader of the House allow a proper discussion in this House on what we are actually doing?

**Chris Grayling:** We just heard from the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee that it does not necessarily have enough applications for business at the moment. That will, of course, carry through into the new Session, when more time will be available. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will find a ready audience for such a debate.
Backbench Business

Voluntary Sector: Faith Organisations

11.8 am

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution of faith organisations to the voluntary sector in local communities.

Christians possess a rich heritage of social reform and charitable care that is alive today. In the 19th century, William Wilberforce and Lord Shaftesbury led campaigns for the abolition of slavery and child labour. Others, such as Barnardo and William and Catherine Booth, were involved in founding charitable organisations, covering every conceivable form of human need, as an expression of Christian love. The Christian principles that drove Wilberforce and Shaftesbury are still very much alive in Britain today and are as relevant as ever.

The Evangelical Alliance, the largest and oldest body representing evangelical Christians in the UK, estimates that there are more than 2 million evangelicals in the UK. This is an increasingly diverse constituency, including 500,000 Christians from black majority churches and, more widely, over 1 million UK Christians from black, Asian and other minority ethnic communities.

To clarify, I shall speak mainly about the contribution of Christian communities, as those are the ones I know best. I am sure that other hon. Members will speak about the contribution of other faiths to our local communities.

The 2014 national church and social action survey listed the top 10 activities of churches sampled as involving: food distribution; parent and toddler groups; school assemblies and religious education work; festivals and fun days; children’s clubs for those aged up to 11; caring for the elderly; debt counselling; youth work for those aged 12 to 18; cafés that are open to the public; and marriage counselling courses. Every one of these activities takes place in my constituency, most multiple times. The tremendous work done by church members in my constituency is, I am sure, representative of that taking place across the country, often in the toughest and most challenging situations and areas. I am talking about street pastors helping the homeless at night; addiction support; job clubs, which are particularly successful in New Life church in my constituency; helping victims of human trafficking; supporting children with special needs; prison visiting; literacy projects; fostering and adoption support; and getting alongside those with mental health problems.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. To add to her list, over Christmas when we had terrible floods in Yorkshire, some of the people who helped the most in our communities were from faith-based organisations. I should particularly mention the Salvation Army and the mosques in Bradford; people from them came over to my constituency to help with the clear-up operation. They play a vital role when there is an emergency such as flooding.

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend is quite right, and indeed the Brethren also play a vital role in disaster relief support. The value of these activities to society is vast. They represent a glue that holds together the fabric of our communities, particularly in many needy places. Indeed, I have heard it said that youth work in this country would collapse without the churches’ involvement. Toddlers might miss out on the developmental benefits of playing with others at a vital age, and their mothers—particularly young mums—would miss out on relationship building and support. Cafés provide not only nutritious, wholesome and economical meals in pleasant surroundings, but a place with a listening ear for the vulnerable, the lonely and the low.

Marriage counselling services invest in families and stable homes, which we know bring massive benefits to society, in terms of children’s mental health and educational attainment. When things go wrong, there is a great emotional cost to families and society. In fact, the Marriage Foundation has estimated that the cost of family breakdown is greater than the entire defence budget. That shows the invaluable contribution that strengthening family life can make to our society.

On caring for the elderly, we know what a strain our social services are under, caring for an ageing population and providing them with dignity, when families are often at a distance. It is so often the church that fills the gap when things do not work out as intended. Faith-based organisations and charities often go the extra mile in ensuring that someone is seen, remembered and reassured. They often provide bereavement support, too.

Faith groups and churches are doing vital work on debt counselling, helping individuals to best manage their finances. We know the cost of spiralling debt: it can lead to family breakdown, emotional heartache and misery for many. I commend the work of Christians Against Poverty, which works with the whole person to provide a range of services for those in debt, without any public funding. It was recently named debt advice provider of the year at an industry awards ceremony.

I can confidently say that most of these services are provided without public funding. Where public funding is obtained, the value for money is outstanding. To speak for a moment in monetary terms, a recent report by the Cinnamon Network, the “Cinnamon Faith Action Audit”, estimates that collectively the Church provides over £3 billion of social support to UK society. It also found that faith groups deliver 220,000 social action projects, serve 48 million beneficiaries, and mobilise 2 million volunteers. The Church may not be perfect, but without her society would certainly notice a difference.

Research by the Evangelical Alliance found that 81% of evangelical Christians do some form of voluntary work, serving in the wider community with their church at least once a year, and 37% do so at least once a week. At the recent mayoral hustings for churches in London, the Church of England was quoted as having three times as many outlets in the capital as Starbucks. My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) said in his remarks at the end of the debate:

“The Evangelical Alliance is part of the Big Society, on the front line tackling crime, on the front line tackling homelessness, and so many other of the challenges London is facing.”

That is so true.

I shall now refer to other quotes from both individuals and organisations, including one from the Prime Minister who said:
“I’m an unapologetic supporter of the role of faith in this country…Across the country, we have tens of thousands of fantastic faith-based charities. Every day they’re performing minor miracles in local communities. As Prime Minister, I’ve worked hard to stand up for these charities and give them more power and support. If my party continues in government, it’s our ambition to do even more.”

I was very pleased indeed to hear that. Similarly, several local authorities have spoken positively of the contribution that church groups make to our local communities, many of them speaking of the fact that they are closely embedded and close to the grassroots of their communities. They speak of their continuing involvement in local communities, which is so important.

Today is an election day. Political parties will come and go when it comes to their authorities in our communities, but the Churches will be there enduring—this century, as they did last century and for centuries before. That is why it is so important that we support them in the way that we need to.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept that these faith groups are the unsung heroes of society, who—day in, day out—selflessly look after others and provide help within our communities without looking for any thanks whatever, doing so purely for the satisfaction of being able to help people less fortunate than ourselves?

Fiona Bruce: I absolutely agree and thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention.

Churches across the country are not just buildings that bring people together; they are made up of people of all ages, of all political persuasions, the well-off and the not so well-off who, compelled by compassion, work—day in, day out—alongside some of the most vulnerable on our streets and estates to support our local communities.

Local authorities, however, would do well to improve their understanding of what faith groups do and the way that they work. I believe this has improved over recent years, but I still think more could be done. During the last Parliament, the all-party Christian group produced a report that dealt with this issue. Some of its recommendations still stand today. Local authorities have been concerned about, for want of a better word, the “motivation” of faith groups, while faith groups themselves often have a limited understanding of how local government works and the language required to engage with it.

Guidance from central Government on how to improve these relations and how to improve religious literacy on the part of all of us working in our local communities would be helpful. Steps should be taken to help us all understand the diversity of beliefs in today’s United Kingdom—a key factor in strengthening civil society and promoting community cohesion, stability and resilience. Also helpful would be an approach by local authorities to provide what has been termed “reasonable accommodation” of religion and belief, wherever possible.

Faith groups do not expect funding for what is often called “proselytisation”, but they do ask to be free to be open about their beliefs and values. If, for example, a conversation starts naturally during voluntary work, it is not unreasonable to be allowed to continue it, particularly if it was initiated by those who are being helped. It is, after all, their faith that motivates religious people to work in their local communities in the first place. An approach should be adopted that allows faith groups to be open about their beliefs and values and the practices they encourage rather than promoting a privatisation of belief. This would provide for authentic religious expression.

Many Christians, in particular, are deeply concerned about their religious liberty and freedom of expression. Not so long ago, the Evangelical Alliance conducted a poll, and 97% of those who responded said that “policies which ensure religious liberty and freedom of expression were important to them”, and 71%—1.3 million people—said that it would affect their votes. This is almost an election-shifting number. Of all the concerns that were highlighted in the poll, that was the one that mattered most to Christians, even more than issues such as euthanasia and policies to reduce the availability of pornography. The Government would do well to note that.

Many of the recommendations contained in the Christians in Parliament report “Faith in the Community”, produced in 2013, remain relevant today. Only last week, the Oasis Foundation published a report entitled “Faith in Public Service—The Role of the Church in Public Service Delivery”. Time prohibits my quoting from it in as much detail as I should like, but I do want to quote from one or two sections. For instance, the report stated:

“Local authorities…have yet to grasp the opportunities for engagement with the voluntary sector”.

That, I think, is very relevant to the work of the churches, which is what the report was highlighting. It also stated that “the Church possesses…An unparalleled reach and volunteer membership…A sense of ‘place’ both in terms of physical presence and as a bridge into local communities…A traditional and largely accepted…role in community cohesion and regeneration…The ability to deliver locally-specific integrated services, tailored to individual needs, with both personality and precision. These strengths have enabled individual churches around the country to engage confidently in the delivery of…important local services. Many local authorities have spoken positively of the contribution that church groups make to our local communities, which is what the report was highlighting. It also stated that“the Church possesses…An unparalleled reach and volunteer membership…A sense of ‘place’ both in terms of physical presence and as a bridge into local communities…A traditional and largely accepted…role in community cohesion and regeneration…The ability to deliver locally-specific integrated services, tailored to individual needs, with both personality and precision. These strengths have enabled individual churches around the country to engage confidently in the delivery of…important local services. It is not unreasonable to be allowed to continue it, particularly if it was initiated by those who are being helped. It is, after all, their faith that motivates religious people to work in their local communities in the first place. An approach should be adopted that allows faith groups to be open about their beliefs and values and the practices they encourage rather than promoting a privatisation of belief. This would provide for authentic religious expression.

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I pay tribute to organisations such as the Cinnamon Network, the street pastors, the Trussell Trust and Christians Against Poverty, all of which have done important work in encouraging that level of confidence. They have rolled out programmes that churches have been able to adopt, knowing that they will be successful and effective. However, according to the 2013 report:

“There remains a perception on the part of local authorities and the public that faith organisations will be conditional in who they deliver services to and that they will seek to proselytise…that fear is more one of perception than reality”.

I ask Ministers to think about how we can get the balance right, ensuring that there is the freedom of religion that is so yearned for by people of faith while also ensuring that local church groups are confident that they can engage with local authorities, that the expression of their faith will be accepted and understood, and that they are able to exhibit it freely. We can all do more in that regard.
Let me make one more point before I end my speech. A great many organisations and volunteers are concerned about a proposal, on which consultation took place a few months ago, for Ofsted inspectors to regulate and inspect out-of-school activities among young people that take up more than six hours a week. Earlier this year, the Schools Minister told us that there had been more than 10,000 responses to that proposal, although the consultation had taken place over the Christmas period. It is proposed that if members of a Christian youth group engage in sport or games on one day a week, or meet on one evening a week and, perhaps, on Sundays to discuss their faith, Ofsted inspectors can visit them to establish whether their activities are compatible with a list of British values drawn up by the Government to find out whether they are extremist. Could any of the types of work that I have described today be described as extremist? Actually, perhaps they could, because of their love, care and concern for the most vulnerable and needy in our society. However, I submit that there is nothing less British than the Government restricting the expression of religious faith based on an arbitrary set of values drawn up in Whitehall. That is the very opposite of what I understand conservatism to be.

Ofsted inspectors are unlikely to be looking for illegal activities. They will be looking for activities that fit into a vaguely defined list of sentiments such as non-violent extremism. This was criticised only yesterday at the Joint Committee on Human Rights—a Committee of both Houses on which I sit—as being an impossibly vague definition. It is not clear what the list of British values actually involves. There have been countless statements on the matter from Ministers, including the Prime Minister, and a number of uses of it in regulations. If the Government do not have a clear idea of what these values are, how can anyone else do so? As we in this House should be well aware, vague laws and vague policies are a breeding ground for abuse and misapplication.

There is grave concern on the part of many Christians across the country about these proposals, and rightly so. A witness who appeared before the Joint Committee yesterday told us that the proposals could deter volunteerism. That is by no means the first time we have heard that opinion being expressed, including by many faith organisations. Many small immensely valuable initiatives fear that if they use the wrong word or if their words or phrases are misinterpreted, they will come under unfair scrutiny from inspectors, whose job is to inspect schools.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that concerns have also been expressed by teachers? Many of the volunteers who work in Sunday schools and other youth organisations are teachers, and they are afraid about possible damage to their professional reputation following an Ofsted inspection. This could well result in their withdrawing from such work, which would be hugely damaging to those organisations.

Fiona Bruce: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend that teachers are concerned about their professional reputations and even about their jobs.

Ofsted’s job is to inspect educational standards in schools, not to make ideological judgments about church youth groups or any other voluntary initiatives. Professor Julian Rivers told us in his evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights that the proposal could well be in breach of the European convention on human rights because even the registration—let alone the inspection—would restrict the free exercise of religion.

A joint statement made last month by several national organisations representing millions of Christians said of the proposals that

“the scope for vexatious complaints is considerable, especially in the current climate of aggressive secularism and religious illiteracy.”

That is something that I mentioned earlier. The statement went on:

“Whilst Christians wholeheartedly support reasonable measures to prevent terrorism and violent extremism, these proposals will lead to a loss of civil liberties and create a large bureaucracy that will divert resources away from restraining extremists who reject UK law. Such individuals will simply ignore or effortlessly circumvent the registration requirements. We urge the government to drop these proposals and develop a targeted, intelligence-led approach that will genuinely inhibit the activities of violent extremists.”

I ask the Minister to consider this and supply a response to these concerns, perhaps not in this debate but later.

I should like to give the House an example of an organisation that is concerned about the proposals. Christian Camping International UK provides in excess of 30,000 children and young people with more than 500 events across more than 250 venues. They are experts in this sector. My own boys have benefited from camping holidays run by faith groups. The organisation has listed a number of potential unintended consequences from the proposals. It says:

“Much of the activity referred to above is dependent on a large number of volunteers. Finding volunteers is a constant issue and the Government should be aware that increasing the level of bureaucracy involved in providing such events will only exacerbate the difficulty.”

The organisation points out that it is already regulated in a number of ways, including under charity laws and regulations and safeguarding regulations, and through the Disclosure and Barring Service. It says that

“there are no examples of such Christian ministries in the UK teaching extremism, nor encouraging young people to celebrate terrorism or become terrorists…The proposals have the potential both to overload the sector with more costs and red tape…which the Government seems to have radically underestimated”.

I ask the Minister to respond to that.

The Government have begun to roll back on some of the proposals put out in the consultation document. Earlier this year, the Minister for Schools said that one-off residential activities would not be included, and we have had an indication that Sunday schools would also not be included. While I welcome those intentions, I point out again to the Government that the proposals have severe issues that run far deeper than those few qualifications can address.

Mr Speaker: Has the hon. Lady concluded her speech?

Fiona Bruce: I am conscious that it is important not to take more than a fair amount of time. There is much more that I could say on the issue, but I believe that I have made the important points.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I was merely asking.
Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing this debate. She has certainly kept the Backbench Business Committee busy in recent weeks and to great effect, not least on this occasion. I agree with everything she said, including her apposite criticism of the Government’s dreadful proposal in effect to turn Ofsted into a state regulator of religion. I hope that her criticisms will be heeded by the Minister and that the proposal will be abandoned in due course.

I hope that this debate will achieve two things. First, I hope it will draw attention to the extraordinary scale and importance of the contributions made by faith-based organisations to communities up and down the country. The hon. Lady set out well the breadth of what is being done. Secondly, I hope that the debate will allow us to consider a specific proposal made by the all-party parliamentary group for faith and society, which I chair, to ease the constraints that currently hold back faith-based organisations when they seek to work with both national and local government. I will set out that proposal and I hope that the Minister will be able to respond to it.

There is undoubtedly a new movement of faith-based social activism in Britain today. Its significance has not yet been fully understood or acknowledged, but at a time when some people argue that religious faith is on the way out, there is no doubt that the movement is making a growing and immensely positive contribution to our society. The movement is one of the most hopeful developments around.

I chaired the advisory group for a report by the think-tank Demos called “Exploring the role of faith in British society and politics…”. It was published in 2013 and is available on the Demos website. The researchers analysed the UK findings of the European Values Study, a regular, highly regarded pan-European survey, and found that about one in eight people in Britain say when asked, “I belong to a religious organisation.” Demos cross-tabulated that with participation in volunteering, and the analysis showed that people who say that they belong to a religious organisation are far more likely to volunteer than others. More than that, it showed that for quite a number of the types of volunteering examined, including volunteering for a trade union, on local community action, on women’s issues, on international development and on human rights, the one in eight who belong to a religious organisation account for a larger number of volunteers than the entire seven in eight who do not. That tells us something important and surprising—perhaps even rather unsettling for some—about where the capacity to change things for the better can be found in modern Britain.

The most striking example, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Congleton, has been the food bank phenomenon. If we had speculated 10 years ago about what would happen if tens of thousands of people were suddenly, following changes of Government policy, unable to afford enough food for themselves and their families, I certainly would not have predicted that the faith groups would have been the ones to step up to meet the need. That, however, is what has happened. The 400-plus food banks organised by the Trussell Trust have provided food for more than half a million households in the past year, giving, on average, just over two lots of three-day emergency food supplies to each of them. Every one of those food banks is based on a Church. Islamic Relief has organised in a number of areas in the mosques to collect food in support of those food banks, too. It has turned out that in 21st-century Britain it has been the Churches, uniquely, that have had both the motivation to tackle this problem, which has erupted so quickly, and, perhaps more surprisingly, the capacity and the resources to take it on. Nobody else has been able to do that, but the faith groups have.

That again tells us something very important about the realities in Britain today and where the potential for changing things for the better resides.

One striking example of this new movement of faith-based social activism, and a very distinctive element in the voluntary sector we are reflecting on in this debate, is London Citizens. It is made up of churches, mosques, a synagogue, schools, trade union branches and community organisations, and it campaigns on issues that the members collectively agree are pressing in their community. For example, it has campaigned in favour of a living wage at a higher level than the statutory minimum wage, with the aim of making life easier for the lowest-paid workers. That specific initiative taken by London Citizens lies behind the Government’s national living wage initiative. Its campaigning, of which that is an example, has had a remarkable impact, and there is no doubt that the faith commitment of the Muslims, the Christians and others of faith involved in London Citizens has been key in its work. Last week, it gathered 6,000 people at the Copper Box on the Olympic park for its accountability assembly with the two main candidates for today’s elections for London Mayor.

Four years ago, we established, in the House, the all-party group on faith and society, which I chair. Its role is to support faith-based organisations in the contributions they are making to serve their communities, helping to make their contributions better understood and, where we can, to remove some of the barriers that hold them back. The secretariat of the all-party group is provided by FaithAction, which has a pioneering contract with the Department of Health, and I commend the leadership the Department has provided in acknowledging and supporting the contribution of faith-based organisations. That contract is to enable FaithAction to support faith-based health initiatives. Following its establishment, the all-party group held a series of meetings with representatives of faith-based organisations. We held one for organisations contributing to welfare to work; one on health and well-being; one on work with young people, recognising that most youth work in Britain today is undertaken by faith groups, as the hon Lady mentioned; and one on international aid and development.

The organisations we met included: the Sikh Nishkam Centre in Birmingham, where we discussed its work to support unemployed people into jobs; the Muslim-led Faith Regen Foundation, where we discussed its contribution to the Government’s Work programme; the Spear programme, based at St Paul’s church in Hammersmith, which is literally transforming the life chances of unemployed young people; the LifeLine Institute’s alternative school, run by the LifeLine church in Dagenham; the Faith, Relationship & Young People project, based in my borough of Newham; the Jewish Lads’ and Girls’ Brigade; the Hindu-led, Peepal Care; the Parish Nursing initiative; and Jewish Care, which...
provides outstanding residential care. Of the organisations that are focused overseas, we met Hindu-led Sewa International, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Sikh-led Khalsa Aid and Muslim Aid. After those discussions and meetings, we reflected on what all the groups had said to us. A theme that emerged was that many organisations experienced a little bit of difficulty with their local authority—not so much with the members, or councillors, but with the officers.

Council officers frequently find it quite difficult to deal with faith. They are nervous that, if they deal with one faith group, they will find themselves, in fairness, having to deal with all the others, and who knows what that might amount to. They are a bit uneasy anyway that the people involved in these groups may be a little bit out of the ordinary. It just feels to them like quite dangerous territory, which it is probably easier to avoid altogether. Frankly, life would be much simpler if it were not necessary to deal with faith groups at all.

More substantially, local authorities are nervous that if they were to commission services from faith groups, one of two things would be likely to go wrong—either that public funds would be used to try to convert people rather than to deliver the service, or that there would be bias in delivering the service in favour of members of that faith group. The evidence—in so far as there is evidence—is that neither of those things happens in practice. The Demos report touches on that. In its conclusion, it says:

“We found little evidence to confirm critics’ fears about faith group service providers: that their main motivation is proselytising, they are exclusivist and they discriminate. Rather, faithful providers”—that is the term that Demos uses for them—“are highly motivated and effective, and often serve as the permanent and persistent pillars of community. Faith appears to be an effective motivator for community service providers, akin to the notion of a public sector ethos.”

That positive affirmation for those groups is correct, but, of course, it is not inconceivable that one of those concerns felt by local authority officers might, in a particular case, turn out to be well-founded. It is not inconceivable that one of those problems could arise.

The all-party group on faith and society decided to develop what we call a covenant—it was actually the suggestion of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy)—in the hope of building trust on both sides, between local councils on the one side and the faith-based organisations in their area on the other. The text of that covenant is on the website of the all-party group. Let me read the preamble to the covenant, because it explains what our intention is.

“The coming decade will see the country facing new social needs and tough new challenges. There will be fresh demands on public health, social care, education, employment support and community inclusion. These challenges will require the identification of a new set of resources. We will need to unlock the potential of every part of our society to contribute towards solutions. We believe that one important resource can be realised by supporting faith-based organisations to work with local authorities constructively and effectively, as part of civil society. That will mean ensuring that local authorities are confident in commissioning services from, and transferring assets to, appropriately qualified faith-based organisations, and that they include faith groups when they look for solutions to social needs.

The APPG on Faith and Society is convinced that faith groups have a great deal to offer as providers and advocates for the communities in which they serve, and that some of their potential is being unnecessarily overlooked at present. To help tackle the problem, the Group has drafted a Covenant which can be adopted by faith groups and local authorities in cities across the UK. Together, local authorities and faith communities should work out a local version of the commitments below, according to the priorities and needs of that locality. The Covenant is a joint commitment between faith communities and local authorities to a set of principles that guide engagement, aiming to remove some of the mistrust that exists and to promote open, practical working on all levels.”

Fiona Bruce: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his work in the all-party group on faith and society, which he chairs, and for jointly securing this debate with me. He might not be aware, so I thought I would mention, that a report published by the Oasis Foundation last week, “Faith in Public Service”, highly commends the work of the all-party group and says:

“The Covenant which the APPG has developed in partnership with FaithAction provides a framework in which faith organisations can make explicit commitments to good practice, not least in terms of inclusion, while having their faith identities fully respected.”

The report states that a mere handful of localities “have yet adopted the Government’s provisions”, so it calls for “greater national urgency in driving forward this...work, both from central government, through the Local Government Association and through national Church denominations. It argues that the Church could even develop a national inclusion charter and kitemark, based on the covenant, so that individual churches could signal to their local authorities and the public their commitment to inclusion.

Stephen Timms: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for drawing attention to what the Oasis Foundation has said. I was aware of that—I was going to refer to it later—and I very much appreciate it. It underlines the importance of making progress in this area.

I was pleased that the first local authority to sign up to the covenant, in December 2014, was the city of Birmingham, the biggest local authority in Europe. Like all local authorities, it faces an enormous challenge over the next few years, as big cuts in spending have to be made. Members of Birmingham City Council rightly concluded that working with faith groups could be one way to help them to get through. They might commission some services from faith groups, perhaps transfer some assets and buildings to faith groups, and ask them to run services—a variety of possibilities might be pursued.

Fiona Bruce: May I commend an excellent initiative that Warrington Borough Council undertook with a group of people of faith? When the local library was to be closed, it was taken over by that group, which is now running it very successfully for the local community.

Stephen Timms: I believe that many such things will have to be done if services are to be maintained.

When our all-party group paid a visit to Birmingham, we visited the central mosque and the central synagogue. At the remarkable Sikh Nishkam Centre, where an enormous number of things are being done, we took part in a roundtable discussion hosted by the Bishop of Birmingham, David Urquhart. The faith group leaders in Birmingham have been meeting regularly ever since
9/11 and have a very good relationship, and the new partnership between the faith groups in the city and its civic leadership, signified by its signing up to the covenant, is blazing a trail that others will want to follow. The covenant has since been signed by several other local authorities in Leeds, Northamptonshire, Barnet, Solihull and, most recently, Calderdale.

It is difficult in such a debate to do more than scratch the surface of what is being delivered. The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) mentioned the Salvation Army. It has been providing community services for 150 years, especially to those who are vulnerable and marginalised, and today it says:

“Motivated by our Christian faith, we continue to offer local provision in over 700 centres throughout the UK to all who need them.”

A recent initiative has been #TOYOURCREDIT, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s task group on responsible credit and saving, which was launched in 2014. There has been a pilot in London and Liverpool, and you might remember, Mr Speaker, what the Archbishop had to say about Wonga when this all began.

The pilot in London and Liverpool has engaged more than 200 churches, trained 150 credit champions and is on target to bring in 3,000 new credit union members. The planned 18-month roll-out to 50 dioceses aims to benefit 2.5 million people. Next month is the first credit union month across the London diocese. I welcome the initiative of the Archbishop of Canterbury to host a celebration of positive grassroots action of faith communities at Lambeth Palace in a couple of weeks’ time, including a presentation from the Department for Communities and Local Government’s Near Neighbours initiative.

Like the hon. Member for Congleton, I commend the Cinnamon Network, which identifies successful and effective initiatives undertaken by a church in one area, and encourages the adoption of that idea on a franchise model by congregations elsewhere. I welcome, too, the important work of the Inter Faith Network and its director, Harriet Crabtree.

It is interesting to look at how such work is carried out in other countries. In Germany there is a formalised arrangement for the main Protestant and Catholic Churches to deliver some welfare services on behalf of the state. In 2009, in the USA, President Obama set up a diverse advisory council on faith-based and neighbourhood partnerships. He asked it to recommend how to strengthen the social partnerships between Government and non-Government providers, including how to strengthen their legal basis. That led to the publication at the end of March of Executive Order 13559 on fundamental principles and policy-making criteria for partnerships with faith-based and other neighbourhood organisations.

The order makes it clear, rather as our covenant does, that faith-based organisations can participate in federally-funded social service programmes on the same basis as any other organisation, and it specifies, for example, as a condition of direct federal assistance that an organisation must not discriminate on the basis of religion, or require a beneficiary to attend or participate in any explicitly religious practice. Other points along those lines are also set out.

That executive order is 304 pages long and represents a very different approach in the USA from the light-touch voluntary covenant advocated by our all-party group. Nevertheless, looking at examples from other countries strengthens the case for a Government initiative in the UK.

The hon. Member for Congleton intervened a few minutes ago to draw attention to the Oasis Trust. That multi-academy trust is one of the biggest school providers in the country. The Oasis Foundation aims to carry out research in this area and publish a report. As the hon. Member for Islington North (Marguerite Sutcliffe) noted, its first report, “Faith in Public Service”, points out correctly that the covenant that I have described has been taken up by only about half a dozen local authorities so far.

I commend to the Minister the report’s call that the Government, under the auspices of the Office for Civil Society, should “articulate a clear strategy for national and local engagement with faith organisations, to include…sponsorship of the Covenant developed by the APPG on Faith and Society”, and should offer further encouragement to local authorities to engage churches and church-based organisations in their commissioning decisions. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), who speaks for the Opposition on Office for Civil Society matters, is in the Chamber. I welcome the further endorsement of the covenant provided by the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life, chaired by Baroness Butler-Sloss, in its comprehensive and thoughtful report “Living with Difference: Community, Diversity and the Common Good”, which was published last December with the support of the Woolf Institute of Cambridge.

I want to read part of a newspaper article that appeared some time ago. It was written by Neal Lawson of the think-tank Compass, and it is about the role of faith groups in our society. I will not quote much of it, because quite a large amount comprises criticism of people such as me who were Ministers in the last Labour Government. However, it goes on to say something about faith groups that I very much agree with:

“They don’t just talk. They do. Religious communities are among the increasingly few places that bring people together as citizens rather than as consumers—fighting for a living wage and against poverty.

For me, as an atheist and a full-time politico, this is unsettling…I am a secularist and believe in the disestablishment of church and state—in particular, I want to see the end of faith schools. And, of course, religion has been the cause of terrible deeds—although none perhaps in recent years as abhorrent as those of atheists. But in words and deeds, in the world I see around me, the positive role faith plays far outweighs the negatives.”

I think that that will be the view of a growing number of people—including, surprisingly, people such as the author of that article—as they look at what is happening in our society and think about where we can find signs of optimism and hope, as well as new ideas about changing things for the better.

I hope that, through this debate, we will be able to draw attention to the extraordinary scale, range and quality of the contributions that faith-based organisations make to communities up and down the country, and that the Minister will be able to acknowledge that contribution at the end of the debate. I also hope he will
consider the proposal from the all-party group on faith and society that the covenant should be signed in local communities—by local councils and by the faith-based organisations wanting to be commissioned by them—to try to get over a number of the barriers that currently hold back some of the activity we have talked about.

11.57 am

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on securing this incredibly important debate on voluntary organisations and faith groups. We should not forget that a tremendous number of people of faith also work in voluntary organisations that are not specifically faith based, so the work of people of faith extends far and wide—further perhaps than that of the organisations we are talking about today.

Fiona Bruce: One excellent example from my constituency is the Middlewich Clean Team—more than 200 people from the Middlewich community who are out and about every weekend keeping Middlewich clean and tidy. The team welcomes members from all faiths and none, and it was initiated by a lady who, in prayer, sought something meaningful she could do for her community.

Jeremy Lefroy: Every Member will probably see an example of that in their constituencies.

I do not want to go over all the things that have been mentioned in the two excellent speeches so far, but I do want to talk about a few organisations in my constituency, perhaps to draw some conclusions about how we go forward and to seek some guidance from the Minister.

In Stafford—as, I imagine, in most constituencies—we have faith groups running nurseries. We also have faith groups doing youth work. I am involved in that a little myself, and it gives me great pleasure, because it is a little outside the run of normal politics.

The street pastors work right across the country. They do tremendous work, and I have been out with them a couple of times. I have seen what they do, in a very gentle way, to support and counsel people on the street, who are often in great distress. It is not easy work; they go out at 10 o’clock, often on a cold winter’s night, and they may be up until two or three in the morning. I have to say that I usually knock off earlier than the rest of the team, and I have great respect for their determination.

We have a children’s bereavement charity, which is so important for children who have lost loved ones, and which is run by people of faith. We have the Salvation Army and the Plymouth Brethren. We also have based in Stafford international faith-based voluntary organisations, the most notable of which is the Dalit Freedom Network, which seeks to work with organisations in India that support Dalit people and their rights.

We have an organisation called House of Bread that started up a few years ago. Last week I had the honour of being the speaker at its fundraiser, and it was wonderful to see how many people were there—how many people it is involved with—and the extent of its work. It started by providing a hot meal on a Wednesday evening to anybody who needed it, whom it invited to a building then owned by one of my local Anglican churches. The Wednesday meal has since gone around the town to various buildings, including Trinity Methodist church, as well as St Mary’s church. It even spent a year and a bit at the Stafford Conservative Association club because we believed it was so important to give a home to this wonderful work. It is now looking to secure its own premises, which is vital because it provides not only meals and food banks but all sorts of support work for people with addictions, as well as family support work.

Housing is an area in which Christian organisations, or faith-based organisations, were, traditionally, involved but tended not to be for many years and have now come back into it. Throughout this time, the YMCA has operated across the country. In my area, YMCA North Staffordshire, based in Stoke-on-Trent but covering Stafford borough, is doing tremendous work in providing homes for young people—perhaps a bedsit—as well as support and opportunities to get into work. It now wants to help them get out from the bedsit into their own home—a flat or a small house in the community—and be able to stand on their own two feet. I pay tribute to the work of YMCA North Staffordshire and its inspirational leader, Danny Flynn, who is a great friend of mine, and who has done a tremendous amount for young people throughout north Staffordshire, as have his whole team. The fact that the number of staff has almost trebled in the past five or six years shows how these organisations can grow. They have managed to build nearly 100 units for young people at a time when funding has not been that easy.

I also pay tribute to the organisations of other faiths that provide services within my community, whether Sikh, Muslim or Hindu, and particularly to Hifsa Iqbal, who is always trying to work on behalf of people of all faiths and none from within her community.

I would like to raise four points, starting with funding, because that is probably the most discussed. We need funding arrangements that are not short term. When there is an arrangement between the voluntary sector and the public sector, within the voluntary sector, or between the voluntary sector and the private sector, the key thing is consistency—a long-term approach. The last thing we want is for money suddenly to be made available and then, just as quickly, for it to be pulled and the service to be discontinued. It is almost harder and more heart-breaking to see a service stop suddenly and people left without it than it not to start in the first place.

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend raises the critical issue of funding. Does he agree that it would be very helpful if local authorities offered faith-based organisations more proactive help with bid-writing, because navigating the thickets of complexity in these documents often dissuades them from even embarking on the process?

Jeremy Lefroy: I totally agree with that. I think we should be looking for funding that is available for many years, even if it is at a lower level and starts in a modest way, rather than writing a big bid. The tendency is to say, “Let’s bid for as much money as we can.” We get the money and the money is spent—it has to be spent within a fairly short period because of public accounting rules—and then there is nothing, and no provision has been made for the continuation of that service.
Does my hon. Friend agree, therefore, that it would also be helpful if, for national initiatives such as the Trussell Trust, street pastors or CAP job clubs, local authorities agreed a nationally accepted and very simplified form of application?

Jeremy Lefroy: I am always in favour of cutting red tape and of simplification, but let us look long term. Let us look not for one or two-year contracts but for five-year or 10-year programmes. Of course, there has to be quality assurance, and if a programme is going off track, it needs to be looked at.

On funding, I also want to mention the local housing allowance, particularly when it comes to housing support. I know that the Government are looking carefully at this, but it will be a big issue if the cost of support—particularly for young people, but for vulnerable people of all ages—is included in the local housing allowance assessment, and therefore the contributions cover only rent and not the cost of support. Unless we sort that out, quite a lot of programmes will close in the coming years because it will not be possible to run them within the local housing allowance framework unless the support element is removed from that.

My second point is about co-operation, which has been addressed at some length and very well. I pay tribute to local authorities generally, and certainly to my own local authorities Stafford Borough Council, Staffordshire County Council and South Staffordshire District Council. They are never afraid to work with faith organisations, and they are very practical about that. That goes for both the elected members and the officers. Of course, some people are a bit nervous about it, as the right hon. Member for East Ham has said, but in general I have found people to be positive. That has probably improved over the last 10 years since I was in local government.

Jeremy Lefroy: That is a very good point, and that may well be the case. Sometimes in faith-based organisations we are a little bit reticent. We do not want to appear to be thrusting ourselves on an unwilling local authority, even though there may actually be a great willingness in the local authority to work together.

My third point is about training and support. We are talking about people giving up an awful lot of their time. In some cases, they are really passionate about something but they need training to enable them to be most effective. Although I am not asking for large sums of money for training or support, perhaps we need to ensure that all proposed programmes contain a training element, because volunteers really appreciate that. Often, such training is done within the programme. Street pastors have excellent training programmes, as do most other organisations. Such training is necessary; without it, people may soon feel out of their depth and become discouraged, which may make them less able or willing to volunteer. We must recognise that these programmes are not for the short term. People often give up years—sometimes decades—of their life for such programmes, and they need to be supported with refresher courses as well as initial training.

Finally, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton has so eloquently put it, we need to allow these organisations space to be who they are. They are faith organisations and people who work in them have faith, so they must not be afraid to show that faith in an appropriate way. We cannot expect them to deny the source of their motivation.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this subject, and I ask the Minister to touch on some of the points I have raised. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton and the right hon. Member for East Ham for bringing such an important subject forward for discussion today.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on securing a debate on such an important subject, and it is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy).

I will talk about a number of things, but I first want to state that I have a great deal of experience in this regard, as hon. Members will know. I was born into a family whose members have devoted their lives to Christian service in running several Christian charities and, indeed, churches. That has been my experience for my whole life, and I speak as someone from that background.

There is no doubt that faith-based organisations play a very significant role in our local communities up and down the country. The vast majority of those involved are volunteers, who freely give their time, their talent, their energy, their love and, very often, their money for the good of other people. As I say, they do so freely and willingly. As we have heard, they do so in the vast number of food banks that have sprung up throughout our country to meet a very important need in our communities; in the pre-schools or youth clubs that are run by Churches and other faith organisations to provide such vital services to families and our young people; in the groups that provide meals and shelter for the homeless, the elderly or the lonely; or organisations working with ex-offenders and those suffering from addiction and, as has been mentioned, the street pastors who go out in our towns and cities to provide a very important service at weekends. They all provide vital services in supporting some of the most vulnerable and needy people in our country.

Back in 2014, a report commissioned in Cornwall sought to put a value on the amount of time given by volunteers from Churches and other faith-based organisations. The report came up with a figure of £20 million every year for the value of the time given by volunteers from Churches in Cornwall, which has a relatively small population. If that was reflected across the whole country, the amount contributed by such volunteers to our country would be several billion pounds a year. I should say that that figure was based just on measuring the contribution of Christian Churches, but many other faith organisations also contribute significantly to our communities up and down the country. We are
It is clear that people of faith make such a contribution across the country, but this is not a new trend; it has gone on throughout the history of our nation. Our very nation has been shaped throughout our history by great men and women of faith who have stood up to be counted and who have broken new ground, such as Wilberforce in abolishing slavery. Florence Nightingale in nursing injured soldiers, the Rev. Chad Varah in founding the Samaritans or, more recently, the street pastors. Throughout our history, people of faith have brought change and reform to our society, and it is very much because of their faith that they have carried out such work.

**Fiona Bruce:** Will my hon. Friend join me in commending Marriage Care for the work it does? It provides relationship counselling and marriage preparation classes across local communities in England and Wales, with 600 trained volunteers. It was founded 70 years ago, after the war, to help ex-servicemen and their families to rebuild their relationships.

**Steve Double:** I am happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating that group. The Church and other faith groups can make a huge contribution to our society in supporting marriage and the family in general. Family breakdown is the cause of many of the challenges and difficulties that our communities face, so the more that families can be supported, the better it will be for our communities. The Church has a very important role to play in doing just that.

The Church can and should be proud of the contribution that it has made and continues to make to our society and our local communities. Often, the Church and other faith-based groups are best placed to meet and address the very real needs that our communities face. They are often very close to or embedded in those communities, and are aware of communities’ needs from a place of involvement. They are often flexible and adaptable, and are able to respond quickly when a need arises—we heard earlier about faith groups responding very quickly to crises such as flooding. They are also very practical. They go right to the point of need, rather than getting caught up in process and bureaucracy. They can see the needs that people face and respond quickly and practically to meet them.

It is also pleasing that we have a Prime Minister who is not afraid to acknowledge the work of the Church and other faith groups in our country. It is pleasing to hear him stand up in this House and declare that we are a Christian nation, and that it is our Christian heritage and the values it has given to our country that have made us the great country that we indeed are. He also actively supports the Church, other Christian organisations and other faith groups in their vital work. It is incredible that, in the 21st century, we have a Prime Minister who is not afraid to stand up and make statements like that, including in this very Chamber. We should be thankful that he is prepared to do so; it is quite refreshing, especially in an age when the Church is increasingly marginalised and is even sneered at in some quarters for its work.

Christians often feel that they need to play down their faith when they volunteer or are carrying out the work that they do. That is deeply regrettable. It is their faith that motivates them, so to find that they have to apologise for or in some way play down the role it plays in the work that they do is deeply concerning.

**Fiona Bruce:** Will my hon. Friend join me in extending deep appreciation to Her Majesty the Queen, who has made it clear in a number of her Christmas broadcasts that her own deep personal faith has sustained and motivated her in her great sense of duty towards her citizens over so many decades?

**Steve Double:** I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. Her Majesty the Queen is a shining example of someone of deep faith and conviction who has given her whole life to the service of our country and is prepared to acknowledge her faith and say that it is one of the reasons why she has been the person whom we all love and respect. We should be very grateful for that.

We often find that the place of Christians and the Church in our society is being eroded and undermined. There is a growing feeling that the work of the Church and its freedom to stand up for what it believes to be right and true are under attack. I have stated in debates elsewhere in this House that I believe that we have surrendered too much of our liberty in the name of equality. The Christian Church has often felt the brunt of that erosion of freedom of speech. We should never be afraid to make the connection between the excellent work that the Church, Christian organisations and other faith groups carry out in our society and the deep faith and conviction that motivate them to do that work.

I put on record that I believe we should show our great gratitude to the many thousands of men and women of faith who work tirelessly and give of themselves for the good of others in many of our communities. It is right that today we show our appreciation of everything that they do. We should also celebrate and value the work of the Church, but we should not seek to restrict the freedom to exercise faith. Hon. Members have already touched on the proposal to force Sunday school and the freedom to exercise faith. Hon. Members have already touched on the proposal to force Sunday school and other Church groups to register with Oflsted, and I am already on record as describing that as a deeply regrettable move. I hope that the Government will drop that proposal. We should not seek to restrict further the work of the Church: we should seek to do all we can to encourage it, support it and help it to do more of the excellent work that it does.

I hope that the Minister will clearly state that our country needs the Church and faith organisations. They often carry out work that the state is not able to do, and if they did not do that work it would place an even greater burden on the state and public finances. The work of the Church and faith groups is therefore very necessary and we should do all we can to encourage and support them. I hope we can send a strong message from the Chamber today that we are grateful for the work that men and women of faith do, and that we will do all we can to help, encourage and support them in doing it.

12.21 pm

**Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I join those who have thanked the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and my right hon. Friend the Member for East
[Anna Turley]

Ham (Stephen Timms) for bringing forward today’s debate on an issue of real importance. I also wish to place on record my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee, which plays an important role in the democracy of this place and the ability of hon. Members to give voice to issues that may not be urgent, have a high profile or be raised on the “Today” programme, but are none the less important to the fabric of our society and deserve time in the Chamber. Today’s debate is an example of just such an issue.

Some really interesting points have been made and valuable experience relayed by hon. Members today. The hon. Member for Congleton gave a real sense of the breadth of the services and support provided by faith communities from cradle to grave. I was struck by some of the examples she gave, especially on early intervention and groups that support people before they get into crisis and the state has to intervene, often at great expense. Those groups are there to prevent that. As the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) mentioned, they often save the state money and do things that the state would not be able to do. They play a huge role.

The hon. Lady also mentioned extremism, in the context of Ofsted, which is an issue of grave concern to many civil society and faith groups. Some analysis in The Guardian showed that more than a quarter of the statutory investigations launched by the Charity Commission since 2012 have been directed at Muslim charities associated with running mosques, providing humanitarian relief or undertaking aid efforts in Syria. Of course we have to be vigilant and no one would want to see a single penny devoted to terrorism or those forces that we are trying to tackle here and abroad, but our counterterrorism strategy has to have support from, and integration and communication with, civil society and faith groups at its heart. We must not alienate communities further, and I look forward to working with the Minister with responsibility for civil society and the Charity Commission to ensure that we do not tip the balance too far the other way.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham raised some interesting issues. He mentioned the Trussell Trust and I was struck by how many faith groups are there in times of crisis. Sometimes we take it for granted that when the state has failed—and we in this place have failed—faith groups are there to pick up the pieces. I was struck by the examples he gave of what a powerful force multi-faith groups are, across the breadth of faith communities, when they come together. They are a real source of energy, determination, commitment and passion to build a better society. I am grateful to him for the examples he gave of where that is working. I will come on to mention the covenant, raised by the all-party force multi-faith groups are, across the breadth of faith communities, when they come together. They are a real source of energy, determination, commitment and passion to build a better society. I am grateful to him for the examples he gave of where that is working. I will come on to mention the covenant, raised by the all-party group, later on in my speech. I give it my wholehearted support. I think it has huge potential for clarifying some of the misunderstandings and myths. I hope it will play a role in supporting faith groups to deliver more services.

They are, something that struck me in particular. Civil society groups play a different role from public services. They are not an arm or an agent of the state, but they are often able to do work that our public services cannot. They can respond quickly; be flexible and take risks. There are times when public services are not able to do that, and it is vital civil society is able to respond and react to problems.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay also raised a lot of interesting points. I was struck by the £20 million value put on the work of church groups in Cornwall—a huge contribution to local society, one that is reflected throughout the country. I join him in paying tribute to all the volunteers who give up so much time, effort and money to contribute to our society.

I want to continue my speech by sharing, as other hon. Members have, in the celebration of the role of faith groups in civil society. Indeed, throughout our history the role of faith and faith organisations has run through centuries of social progress: from before the Reformation, when religious duty meant Christians undertook their seven corporal works of mercy, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked or visiting the prisoner; the church parishes that administered the Elizabethan poor laws; to the work of Victorian Quakers. In recent years, it was the energy and imagination of faith groups that drove the Make Poverty History campaign and helped to ensure the Government’s commitment to international aid. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham mentioned London Citizens, a multi-faith organisation that has done so much to shape and drive the debate on the living wage. It has made a real difference to people’s lives. Today, we see many faith-based humanitarian groups saving lives and bringing aid and succour in some of the darkest and most desperate parts of the world.

Faith has driven much of the social progress of British society. Faith organisations continue to be a source of energy, new ideas and passion in civic society today. A recent Demos publication, which my right hon. Friend mentioned, found that religious people are more likely than non-religious people to volunteer regularly in their local community and to feel a greater sense of belonging. They also feel they can influence decisions locally and nationally, and are more likely to take decision-making roles, such as being a councillor, school governor or magistrate.

In my constituency, I see fantastic work undertaken by local faith groups every single day. Footprints in the Community is a faith-based group linked to the Trussell Trust which runs our local food banks in Redcar. It also runs what it calls a men’s shed: a workshop space in which men can meet, learn new skills, and tackle social isolation. Our local mosque in South Bank is so much more than a place of worship; it is a community hub and a resource centre that helps people to learn English, get into work, get help and advice, and tackle problems such as social isolation. We also have the Redcar Beacons Street Angels—other hon. Members have mentioned them—who help people on a Friday and Saturday night in the centre of town. I know from my own experience the role that Christians Against Poverty plays in my local area to help those struggling with debt and financial exclusion.
As has been explored today, many faith groups feel there is a reluctance among local authorities and others to commission services from faith-based providers. Conversely, many local authorities and commissioners have important concerns, which cannot be ignored, over the use of public funds to support faith-based services. It is vital that we try to tackle any misconceptions that exist. There can be a perception that potential users could be excluded on grounds such as religious belief, or that support is founded on outdated views of faith-based morality. However, Dr Sarah Johnsen’s in-depth study at the University of York in 2009 concluded that there was no evidence that faith-based organisations used public funds to propagate religion, or exclude potential users on grounds of religious belief or sexual orientation.

In the coming decade, this country will face new social needs and tough new demographic and economic challenges. There will be fresh demands on public health, social care, education, and employment support services, and on community inclusion. These challenges will require new resources. We need to unlock the potential of every part of our society to contribute towards solutions, and faith groups will be a vital part of that.

**Fiona Bruce:** As the hon. Lady says, faith groups are playing, and will increasingly play, an important role in promoting community cohesion. Does she think that both local and national Government should do more to reach out to faith groups, to help them to fulfil their potential in that respect?

**Anna Turley:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Faith groups will play an increasingly important role, and not just in the way we deliver services. She mentions community cohesion; we have in our society challenges of integration and understanding, and in dispelling myths. Community groups are right on the frontline of communities and are able to bridge divides and break down myths and boundaries. I wholeheartedly support local and central Government in taking steps to build on that.

The big society promised to unleash great civic power, but for many groups it has turned out to be a bit of a damp squib. Many faith groups, instead of benefiting from a huge unleashing of opportunity, are simply picking up the consequences of policy failure, desperation and crisis, as we have seen with food banks. I would like faith-based organisations to be seen as an important resource throughout the delivery of public services. If they are to be supported in working constructively and effectively as part of civil society, it will mean ensuring that local authorities are confident in commissioning services from them and transferring assets to them, and in working with appropriately qualified faith-based organisations. We need to make sure that local authorities include faith groups when they look for solutions to local social needs.

I recognise the work of the all-party parliamentary group on faith and society in demonstrating that faith groups have a great deal to offer as providers and advocates for the communities in which they serve. Some of their potential is unnecessarily being overlooked. To that end, I welcome the covenant that the group has established, which my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham explained in such detail. The covenant could be adopted by faith groups and local authorities in cities across the UK, and I would like to see it more widely promulgated. It could go a long way towards breaking down myths, providing confidence and, by establishing agreed frameworks, building a relationship of trust and practical support.

Politicians of all religious beliefs and none do well to remember that we do not have a monopoly on the social conscience of this country, nor on social action. That is why the support of, and respect for, civic society is so important, and must remain at the heart of the Government’s vision for public services and social change.

I welcome this debate on today of all days, when I sincerely hope with all my heart that we will celebrate having the first ever Muslim Mayor of our capital city of London. That will send out the message to people around the world that our society in Britain is a place of openness, decency, and tolerance; a place where a person’s love of their community and city, and their commitment to others, to public service, and social good, is what defines them; and a place where faith is a source of positive energy, not something to be perverted as a smear. I sincerely hope that today’s election result shows us, in the spirit of this debate, that hope and unity will triumph over division in both British politics and civil society.

12.33 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (James Wharton):** What a fascinating debate this has been. It has touched on areas of Government policy in a lot of Departments, and on experiences that so many hon. and right hon. Members have had in their constituencies. We have heard about so much of the great work that those of different faiths in our society do for the communities that we are all here to represent.

Faith is a deeply personal and individual thing. It can inspire us when we strive to achieve, to do more, and to change the world and the circumstances around us. It can console us when we are at our lowest ebb. It is interwoven into the history of our great country and throughout our society. It clearly has inspired many of the comments that hon. Members have made in this debate, which I welcome given its importance and relevance to so much of what is happening around us.

The Prime Minister has rightly praised the role and importance of faith in our society. Members of Parliament from across the party political divide recognise the different aspects of faith, and the ways in which it contributes to what we all want to achieve: a better, more successful society, community and country.

Faith organisations represent a huge part of our charitable and voluntary sector. There are nearly 50,000 faith-based charities; 27% of the charities registered in this country are faith-based—from small groups to large organisations such as the Salvation Army, which has been mentioned more than once today and has made a real contribution to our society for some 150 years.

Faith also makes a contribution to our policy and policy development. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on her work in this area and securing this debate in tandem with the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). She spoke of the range of charities and organisations that work in this area and the variety of work they do.
I would like to mention street pastors. There are some in Stockton, and when I was first elected—I have done so subsequently—I went out with them to see the great work that they do on my local high street. They help people when they need a bit of extra support and calm people when they are scared, frustrated or frightened. I remember one night vividly. At about 2 o’clock in the morning, we approached one young lady who was somewhat the worse for wear—“tired and emotional” might be the appropriate jargon in this context. She gladly took the support—the bottle of water, the flip-flops and the welcoming arm around the shoulder—that the street pastors gave her. She looked at me and said, “You—you look like that Tory!” I said, “Don’t worry about that now; we’re here to help.” That is what this Government and these organisations are about—not party politics, but assisting people in our society to make it a better place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton spoke about campaigning work on the crucial issue of human trafficking, as well as literacy, youth work and keeping Middlesbrough clean. Contributions are made at different levels and in different ways, but they all matter, and they speak to the great work done by many people in our society, inspired by their faith.

My hon. Friend inspired my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) to make an intervention about his constituency’s experience during the flooding. I know from my visit to his constituency and others throughout the north of England when those devastating floods were experienced over Christmas and the new year that although it was often the Christian organisations that helped, the mosques in Bradford—this was the specific example that my hon. Friend gave—also stepped forward and were quick to organise the most effective support. It was the churches that opened their doors to those who had lost access to their homes because of the impact of the devastating weather across much of the north of England; and it was the churches and other faith and community-based religious organisations that were there to help people when they most needed help.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns) called faith groups “unsung heroes”, but they have certainly not all been unsung in today’s debate. While many have been recognised, there are many more. Indeed, there are so many doing so much that we would not have time to comment on them all this afternoon.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton raised genuine and legitimate concerns about the way in which local government engages with faith-based organisations that want to do good work in our communities. Sometimes fear or a lack of understanding can prevent good things from being done for those communities that local government exists to serve. I am a Communities and Local Government Minister, so this issue resonates particularly with me. I would, of course, be happy to discuss it further with my hon. Friend because we want to ensure that when a positive contribution can be made, everything is done to facilitate it.

I listened carefully to what my hon. Friend said about Ofsted inspections. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Education have been clear that the registration of out-of-school settings will not apply to organisations such as Sunday schools. We do not propose to regulate institutions such as Sunday schools that teach children for only a short period every week. We have to ensure that organisations do the right thing and meet the standards expected of them, but I have listened to my hon. Friend’s concerns. I am sure that they will be drawn to the attention of the Secretary of State for Education. I shall do that, and I know my hon. Friend will, too—in fact, she probably already has.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham on his work with the all-party group on faith and society, and the incredible contribution it makes to informing Members of the breadth of work done out there in the communities we all represent by faith-based organisations. He spoke of faith-based social activism and gave specific examples of the difference it can make when organisations inspired by their faith lead a debate that ultimately contributes to policy change in this place. They convince those who, by virtue of our democratic process, have the opportunity to effect political change by supporting the right issues.

The right hon. Gentleman also spoke about the faith covenant, the development of which by the all-party group on faith and society is welcome. We wanted engagement in the delivery of Government services—particularly at local government level, as suggested by my hon. Friend. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton—to take place in a way that would secure the maximum benefit for all who rely on those services, and the covenant makes a welcome contribution to that discussion.

Stephen Timms: May I ask the Minister to reflect on the Oasis Trust’s proposal that the covenant should be sponsored by the Government, and that the Government should help to spread it among local authorities throughout the country?

James Wharton: Anything that raises the profile of the work that is being done, and that draws attention to the engagement and approach that are needed, is certainly welcome. I will indeed reflect on the right hon. Gentleman’s comments. I am sure that this debate is helping to raise the profile of what is indeed an important issue, but I acknowledge that he would like additional work to be done.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) spoke of the great work that is being done by a range of charities in his constituency, across faiths and across the communities that they serve, which even includes the use of the Conservative association headquarters—I welcome that innovative step. That work is making a real difference to the lives of people in Stafford. He spoke of the need for not just funding, but funding consistency. That sends an important message to central and local government departments, and the arms of the state that commission services, about what is needed by voluntary organisations which, by their very nature and the way in which they come about, are often more effective than any deliberately centrally designed arm of government is likely to be. Balancing the need to ensure that public money is properly protected and accounted for with the need to retain what makes those organisations special presents an important challenge, as does giving them the consistency and certainty that
they need to engage with funding streams and get the best from them. I will certainly take account of my hon. Friend's comments, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Civil Society, who is very involved with this issue, will be interested in what he said.

My hon. Friend also spoke about the value of training and the processes that are needed to ensure that people who are involved in these programmes continue to be trained and retrained so that they can get the best out of the good things that they want to do. His comments were welcome and pertinent, and I know that they will resonate across Government and in his continuing discussions with Ministers.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) made a powerful speech about the contribution of faith to public life. He spoke from his considerable experience, highlighting the historical context of that contribution and what it has done to build the society in which we live today. He gave the specific example of the value of the contribution of Christian volunteers to the society and communities of Cornwall. That contribution, it emerged, was worth £20 million a year, and that did not include the great work done by many other faith groups and groups in general. My hon. Friend rightly observed that when that figure is multiplied to cover the whole country, it becomes clear that a significant contribution is being made to our society.

The quick and practical response of faith organisations is often unparalleled. As has been pointed out, in the event of floods and other disasters, of whatever type and wherever they occur in the world, it is often faith-driven communities that are sufficiently fleet of foot, motivated in the right way, and adequately engaged and connected to ensure that help reaches those who need it most rapidly. Governments always try to be quick to respond to emerging challenges, but they are not always the first to respond or the first on the scene, and they are not always the fastest in providing help where it is needed. Faith organisations often fulfil that role, and the work that they do in that respect is incredibly important.

My hon. Friend also challenged me to recognise, on behalf of the Government, the importance of the contribution of faith to our society and what we do. I hope that I have already made clear the Government's support for faith organisations, but I will restate it for the avoidance of any doubt. Like the Prime Minister, and like many Members who have spoken in the debate, I recognise—the Government recognise—the important contribution that faith makes to our society and the incredible value that it adds to our country. However, my hon. Friend was right to ask for that recognition to be put on record again today because it is important to all of us and the communities that we represent.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), touched on many comments that hon. Members have made. She also made a specific point about the Charity Commission's work in regulating this area. The commission does a difficult job. It deals with a range of charitable organisations and has to ensure that they do not use the freedoms that we rightly give them and the support that the state offers them for purposes that are not charitable. It has to work hard to get the balance right, and the shadow Minister is absolutely right that we should look into any concerns to ensure that that job is being done appropriately.

The Charity Commission must be free to make investigations when appropriate, but it must also be accountable for any decisions it makes and investigations that it carries out. I welcome the shadow Minister's comments about the need to get the balance right regarding the sort of organisations that are chosen for investigation to ensure that every community and every faith, the depth of whose contributions we have heard about today, will feel able to engage fully with the freedoms that exist and the opportunities to contribute to our society.

This has been a positive, informative and well-informed debate. It has without doubt highlighted the breadth of the work that faith and charity organisations do. It has touched on many aspects of Government policy and many areas of support in our society, and drawn on examples from right across our great country. The charitable sector is a great and wonderful thing. It is one of those things that we should be proud of and that makes this country great. A large part of the charitable sector is supported by those motivated by their true and deeply held faith and convictions, which is to be welcomed and encouraged. The comments made by hon. Members today underline the significance that we in this House attach to the work that they do.

12.46 pm

Fiona Bruce: I thank the Minister for his wholehearted and heartfelt support in applauding the work of the many organisations of faith that have been referred to in the debate. I also thank all Members who have spoken and I join them in applauding the work of the organisations to which they have referred. I also thank the Minister for his offer to meet me, because there are four issues that he did not touch on in his response, although I accept that the content of the debate has ranged across several Departments.

First, will the Minister write to me in response to my point about how central Government could work with local authorities to promote religious literacy across our communities, which in turn would promote community cohesion? Secondly, how can our Government explore the concept of reasonable accommodation? Other countries have looked at that, so it would be helpful if we could do so, too. Thirdly, it might have come as a surprise to the Minister to hear that the top concern expressed by evangelical Christians was that policies should promote liberty and freedom of expression. Will he examine the considerable concern that certain policies are having a chilling effect, which I am sure that the Government would want to deter, on free speech on the part of people of faith? Finally, I would appreciate it if he would give a written response to the concerns I expressed in the last part of my speech, which others have touched on, about proposals on out-of-school settings. The consultation was held many months ago and tens of thousands of people across the country are awaiting the Government’s response to the contributions that they spent a long time submitting.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the contribution of faith organisations to the voluntary sector in local communities.
Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I am pleased to see the Minister in his place to respond. I thank the Speaker for granting this debate; it is a privilege to raise in the House the human rights situation in Burundi, which I had the privilege of visiting in 2013 and 2014 and where I received a welcome from the Burundian people that could not have been warmer.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and I jointly called for this debate, so we are dividing the allotted speaking time between us. I acknowledge with great respect the work that he has already undertaken, including the debate that he secured last December, to which the Minister also responded. It is unfortunate that the matter must be revisited so soon, but the human rights situation in Burundi has deteriorated further since. Indeed, the day after last December’s debate, more than 100 individuals were murdered by Government security forces on the worst day of violence in Burundi since the crisis began.

The crisis started a year ago after President Nkurunziza contentiously announced that he would seek a third term, triggering an unsuccessful coup followed by presidential elections in July 2015 that were declared by the UN as neither free nor fair. As I mentioned, there were major disturbances in December, including fighting on the streets by armed opponents of the President, both Hutu and Tutsi. They mounted an attack on a barracks, after which Government troops moved through the neighbourhoods of the capital that were thought to have supported rebels, reportedly killing as many as 700 people and subsequently transporting them to mass graves in state vehicles.

Since then, while there has fortunately been no repeat of fighting on that scale, killings continue on a regular basis. Weekly reports are coming in of new violence and killings and of the Government adopting a strategy of eliminating their opponents. Grounds for suspicion have been described as razor thin. A scared 15-year-old was killed while simply running away from the police. A cameraman and his family were killed, seemingly in the wrong place at the wrong time. Another victim was a teenage boy selling eggs. Other killings seem not so random, with reports of young men who had opposed the Government being hunted down in a refugee camp some distance from Bujumbura to which they had fled. Of most concern are the reports that people are now being targeted for their ethnicity as well as for their political affiliation, with a disproportionate number of the minority Tutsis being sidelined from Government institutions and with the army, which has recently considerably increased in size, being divided into Hutus and Tutsis. Such reports have increased concern in the international community, and it is right that the House discuss this issue now so that we can add our voices to those calling for help to achieve stability and justice for the Burundian people.

Burundi was already one of the poorest countries in the world before the crisis began. It has the second-lowest income and is highly dependent on external aid, with almost half of the state budget externally financed.
However, the suspension of aid flows over the past year mean that the share of the budget accounted for by aid is projected to fall by a third this year. Further economic decline and the reduction of social programmes to the army have combined to produce a humanitarian emergency that has resulted in severe malnutrition. There are reports that people are beginning to starve. The price of rice has trebled in some areas. Farmers who used to sell vegetables to people on the road can no longer do so, saying that their customers have disappeared, fearful of being out and about. Medical supplies dwindle. Children, who make up half of Burundians, suffer disproportionately as a result of violence, exploitation, and family separation. More than 230,000 people have fled in the past year alone, and that number is increasing. Most have gone as refugees to Rwanda and Tanzania, but some have gone to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda.

In Burundi, people cannot freely move around, given a proliferation of police roadblocks and the chance of being arrested if caught in the wrong place. Alarming, there have been reports of hundreds of Burundians, perhaps more—they are often young Burundians; those between their mid-teens and mid-20s—having disappeared or been tortured, reportedly with gun butts, electric cables, bricks or metal rods, with some having even been required to sit in acid. There are reports of girls being raped in front of their parents and of mutilations, such as the removal of genitals and even of hearts. UN human rights records show 600 cases in 2015 and more than 340 during the first four months of this year. Private media outlets have been shut down, and civil society organisations have been closed or banned. Perhaps worst of all, Burundi has become a place of fear. In cities, people fear abductions, torture and murder; in the countryside, they fear hunger, as the economy collapses. Even among the Government’s higher ranks there is a constant fear of assassination, a reality in evidence all too clearly only a couple of weeks ago when a major general in the Burundi army, who had returned to Burundi just three weeks earlier, after a year-peacekeeping mission in the Central African Republic, was shot in his car while going to work with his wife and four children, whom he was going to take to school.

Perhaps the biggest fear of all is that this conflict, which has so far been fought on political lines, could divide Burundi on ethnic lines, between Hutus and Tutsis, and lead to new massacres. History has shown that such events can happen swiftly, as in Rwanda in 1994, with the outside world barely noticing until it was too late. To prevent that, above all, is surely why we in this place must sound an alarm and call on our Government to call on the UN and others in the international community to do all they can to step in to secure peace and stability for the people of Burundi.

I know that this Minister and other Foreign Office Ministers understand the severity of the crisis in Burundi, as he has been good enough to speak with me and my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford on a number of occasions. But in the light of the continuing deterioration of the human rights situation in Burundi, may I urge that Ministers press the United Nations to consider the deployment of a substantial UN force to Burundi, as outlined in a letter of 15 April from the UN Secretary-General to the UN Security Council? That would help to monitor the security situation, improve respect for human rights and advance the rule of law. We hope that it would stem any further human rights deterioration and facilitate dialogue toward a political settlement with the Burundian Government, to be conducted free of a climate of violence or reprisal. We hope that this would, in turn, help stem the increasing humanitarian crisis and perhaps facilitate the reinstatement of aid, suspended by some members of the international community following the commencement of these disturbances, as soon as possible. I would appreciate the Minister’s specific response on those points.

I also welcome last week’s statement by the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court on opening a preliminary examination into the situation in Burundi over the past year. That shows how grave the human rights situation is there. What further support or contribution can the UK offer to help promote peace, stability and a restoration of human rights for the beleaguered people of Burundi?

Finally, on UK aid, the Government have already provided substantial support for refugees from Burundi, and that is appreciated and acknowledged. In view of the numbers involved, which continue to increase, will the Minister use his influence to ask the Department for International Development to encourage other donors to add their support, and to ascertain what further UK support can be provided? Will the Government confirm that they will also look, on the basis that if the UN deployment that I have referred to achieves its objectives, at the reinstatement of bilateral UK aid to Burundi, which was suspended some years ago? Those of us on the Select Committee on International Development have been calling for that for some years.

I look forward to responses on these points from the Minister, if need be after the debate, given that some of them refer to areas where DFID has authority. I do not wish to sound more alarmist than current circumstances indicate, but they are grave. For those of us who have spent time in the past few years in both Burundi and Rwanda, and know how close these countries are, geographically and in other ways, there is deep concern to ensure that our Government and the international community do all they can to ensure that there is no chance of a repeat of the haunting occurrences in Rwanda in the 1990s.

I pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I am most grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to say a few words in this debate.

We had a debate on this subject on 5 December. The reason for bringing it back is that, although there are, in one or two respects, some improvements or signs of light, things have deteriorated substantially in the most important respects.

I will, if I may, start with the positive. There is in Burundi, a country about which many of us care deeply, a huge amount of work going on behind the scenes by faith groups—again, we are talking about faith groups—and others who are really trying to bring relief to people and to calm things down. There have also been great progress in the engagement of the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development. I give huge credit to the Minister for that, as he has taken personal responsibility
for the matter. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) has said, the terrible situation continues.

Let us remind ourselves of what UN Security Council resolution 2248 says. It condemns abuses, “including those involving extra-judicial killings, acts of torture and other cruel, inhuman and/or degrading treatment, arbitrary arrests, illegal detentions, harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders and journalists”.

That was last year, but all those things continue. As my hon. Friend has said, there are alarming first-hand reports that the violence has taken on an ethnic dimension. I have come across one or two cases—they include one that is quite close to me, the details of which I cannot go into—that indicate that that is so.

The original Arusha agreement, under which settlement was reached 15 or so years ago after the terrible civil war and partial genocide in Burundi, was designed to tackle ethnic tension and to achieve balance between the communities. For some years, that balance did indeed prevail, and Burundi was held up as an example of the agreement working, but the agreement is now not being respected in so many areas. I urge the Burundian Government and President Nkurunziza to go back to those years when it was respected.

Finally, what can we do? We can support the people of Burundi, as we are doing, through the DFID and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. We can support the African Union’s peace work and the former Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa who is now in charge of that work. He is a man whom I had the honour to meet several years ago, and who is absolutely committed to this matter. We can urge the acceptance of a proper peacekeeping force. Above all, we can urge the people of Burundi, especially the Government of Burundi, to pull back from the brink.

1.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (James Duddridge): It is indeed a pleasure to be here at a slightly earlier time than billed. Before starting on the substance of this very important debate, may I pay enormous tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce)? For me, today marks 11 years since I entered this House; for others, it is election day. Going forward, we should name today Congleton day. Looking at the Order Paper, I can see that my hon. Friend had questions for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and for the Church Commissioners. I cannot see on the Order Paper whether she raised anything in business questions—hopefully, at that point she had a short break before having debates on faith organisations and Burundi. It should be Congleton day from 5 May to celebrate this active and effective campaign. I look forward to receiving a copy of her local paper with that quote in next week.

I also pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). I thank both he and my hon. Friend for phoning me, emailing me, bending my ear in the Lobby, and providing important information from their friends and colleagues in Burundi and from others in the world who have a particular interest in Burundi.

At the outset, I would like to say that I am answering on behalf of the whole of Her Majesty’s Government. The Under-Secretary of State for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), and I work incredibly closely on this and all issues. We are one Government, one HMG.

The United Kingdom is playing a leading role in trying to build a strong and coherent international response. I visited Burundi in December 2015 and have consistently urged the Burundian Government, in the strongest terms, to end the violence and engage in inclusive dialogue. We have suspended development aid, as was mentioned earlier. We have also imposed travel restrictions and frozen assets of those who have undermined democracy and fuelled conflict.

In June 2015, the UK appointed a special envoy to the great lakes, Danaé Dholakia, who is very active in delivering our messages on Burundi. In fact, I spoke to her yesterday when she was in Stockholm, working with other special envoys. Through the conflict, stability and security fund, we will be increasing our efforts on the ground. These will include deploying a Burundian co-ordinator in Bujumbura. I know that hon. Members present today, and those on the Select Committee, are keen for us to do more on the ground in Bujumbura, and that message is very much understood.

DFID offices in both Kigali and Dar es Salaam have significantly stepped up their analysis and coverage of the crisis, to ensure that they can respond to an evolving situation and increasing humanitarian need as necessary. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary has visited the refugee camps in Tanzania, where we have consistently provided support to refugees, and in fact increased that support. When I was in Uganda, I spoke to UN non-governmental organisations and DFID, which is providing refugee support in that country, as well as looking at the political relationships across the region.

I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton that when I was in Burundi, I met both the UN and human rights organisations in private to hear their detailed concerns, which are not dissimilar from those that hon. Members expressed. In March I addressed the UN Security Council and regional leaders of the great lakes, highlighting the need for urgent action in Burundi. When I visited Rwanda and Uganda last year, I stressed the importance of the countries in the region playing a constructive role. I also met the African Union’s peace and security commissioner, Smail Chergui, in the margins of the African Union summit in January. The African Union is continuing to lead the international response to the crisis. The British ambassadors and high commissioners across the region continue to lobby their host Governments on the importance of taking action to resolve the situation in Burundi, using all parties, be they regional or international.

As this debate has highlighted, the situation in the country remains extremely fragile. The UN estimates that nearly 500 people have died in the past 12 months, and that 280,000 people have fled to neighbouring countries, although you will appreciate, Madam Deputy Speaker, that it is very difficult to monitor precise numbers, and actual figures may well be higher. The International Criminal Court has opened a preliminary examination of the violence committed in Burundi to
date. We will continue to work with our partners, including the UN Security Council, to promote accountability through every means available.

Burundi was rightly identified as one of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's 30 priority countries in our 2015 human rights report, published last month. The report makes it clear that the human rights situation in Burundi “poses a threat to the stability of the country and wider region”.

We are extremely concerned about a further deterioration, which is one reason why I welcome this debate and a continued dialogue around the actions that we can take to mitigate against further deterioration in that conflict.

In recent weeks, there has been an alarming increase in assassinations, with about 30 in April, compared with nine in March. There seems to be a move from indiscriminate to more targeted killings. Most recently, Brigadier General Kararuza and his wife, to whom my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton referred, were assassinated on 25 April with their family on the way to school. I thank my hon. Friend for showing me those photos, along with our hon. Friend the Member for Stafford. As harrowing as the photos are, we have a responsibility to see the reality of the atrocities in order to understand what is happening in Burundi. I condemn these killings unreservedly and call on the Government of Burundi to ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice. I will be writing again to the Foreign Minister and, I hope, speaking to the Foreign Minister of Burundi next week to make these points yet again.

Looking beyond the individual tragedy of each death, we are concerned that these events indicate that, far from abating, the cycle of violence fuelled by the Burundian Government is getting worse. Some of that violence is, I think, directed by the Burundian Government and some is conducted by people with the direct command and control of the Burundian Government. It does appear that the nightly violence that was a feature of the conflict has subsided. However, this is no cause for optimism, as more and more people have left the country, are not coming out at night or have gone into hiding.

The Burundian Government continue to encourage a climate of fear and intimidation with abductions, disappearances and arrests still commonplace. Some of those people are taken into police custody, but many are being held by the intelligence services in secret detention facilities, without access to due process. Families fear that they will never see their disappeared loved ones again. Recently there has been a small but significant increase in reports of sexual violence—systematic multiple rape organised as a way of punishing and subduing a community.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has indicated that many detainees show signs of torture. There is an increase in torture in Burundi, over and above the initial killings. Reports suggest that torture and ill treatment are not limited to the capital, where the majority of arrests have taken place. A pattern of abuse is emerging across the country. That may be a result of a time lag in our finding out what is happening outside Bujumbura. The Government of Burundi claim that the security forces are arresting only those suspected of serious crimes. I do not believe that that is true, but even if it were, there is no justification for the ill treatment of prisoners, who have the right to expect the state to protect them, and certainly not to pass them on to the Imbonerakure or other third parties who may be responsible for the torture and killings.

I know that many Members are concerned at reports that the violence is increasingly ethnic in nature, and that the spectre of ethnically driven mass violence is looming over the conflict. Although I share those concerns—there are some indications that ethnicity is an increasing factor—we must steer clear of assuming that the whole conflict is racially motivated. The conflict was primarily political and remains so. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton explained the history of President Nkurunziza’s attempts to cling on to power for a third term. That was the origin of the conflict. It was not primarily a Hutu-Tutsi conflict. Hutu opponents of Nkurunziza are also being targeted, and initially were targeted in larger numbers, both by the state and by the Imbonerakure, the youth militia, but there is an increasingly ethnic tone to the conflict, which makes the neighbours of Burundi deeply worried and the international community even more worried than we would otherwise have been.

I want to see an end to the conflict and an end to the human rights abuses in Burundi. When I spoke to former Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa yesterday, we agreed that the only route to a lasting solution lies in an inclusive political process. I give him my full support in his role as the facilitator of the dialogue established by the East African Community. It is right that we let that dialogue take place, and Benjamin Mkapa is the right person to lead it.

I was disappointed by the postponement of the Burundi dialogue, which was due to take place in Arusha this week. Following my conversations, however, I am encouraged by indications that talks will begin on 21 May. President Mkapa is using the intervening period to bring more people to the talks and to have more bilateral talks before the talks themselves happen.

It is essential that all parties, including people who have taken up arms or who have now left Burundi, are part of the engagement and peace process, because a peace process without all the participants is not a proper peace process and will not lead to peace in Burundi. Everybody needs to be included, and by not engaging in an inclusive dialogue, the Government of Burundi are actively obstructing the national reconciliation process. In my phone call to the Burundian Foreign Minister next week and in my letter to him, I will call on the Government of Burundi to come together with all participants and to allow them in some way, shape or form to be in Arusha for the week of 21 May so that the talks can commence.

It is essential that the talks are based very much on the Arusha accord, but I am flexible about the details of how they take place. Like the rest of the international community, I will follow the lead of President Mkapa when he agrees a strategy for the talks.

We are working with our partners on the UN Security Council to agree a deployment of UN police to Burundi. The force will be tasked with monitoring the situation, promoting respect for human rights and advancing the rule of law—all with the aim of creating conditions that will allow a political dialogue to go forward.
The UN Secretary-General has brought forward three options for the police force. The first is a protection and monitoring force with around 3,000 personnel in uniformed units. The second is a monitoring operation with over 220 officers. The third would involve more of an assessment mission, with 20 to 50 officers working with the Burundian police force to increase its capacity.

The UK Government are trying to seek UN agreement on what should happen, but we want the UN police to work with the African Union’s deployment of 200 military and human rights observers. The monitoring mission will have to go across the whole of Burundi and have an authoritative way to report back to the UN Security Council. Once the mission is in place, there will be the opportunity to scale it up, but it is important that we get individuals on the ground as soon as possible to assist with the mission.

The protection and monitoring option is desirable, but, to be frank, highly unlikely to get the support of the Government of Burundi or, indeed, the agreement of the UN Security Council as a whole. Although this option would be tempting for the British Government, it would take a lengthy time to recruit 3,000 French-speaking officers, and we really need them on the ground now. However, discussions are ongoing in the UN Security Council, and I am more than happy, through parliamentary questions or any other method, to keep the House updated.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford has raised with me specific cases of detention and of people who have died in Burundi. I thank him for doing that, because it has been very helpful. He discreetly did not go into details of those cases, but we are working on them, and we will continue to do so. For anyone listening to the debate who knows about those cases, let me say that Her Majesty’s Government are actively pursuing them. People should find some comfort in that, although it does not immediately provide the certainty that I would like them to have.

Let me assure Members that I am as concerned as they are about the human rights situation in Burundi. The UK Government and our international partners want to end these dreadful abuses and find a peaceful way forward. Only then will the people of Burundi be able to live freely without violence and without intimidation. As I said, I visited Burundi last December. I also visited it way back in 2006, when I met President Nkurunziza. Burundi can be a great country again. It needs our help now, but it has the help and attention of the UK Government.

Question put and agreed to.

1.20 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Food Banks: Work Coaches

1. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the outcomes of his Department’s trial of placing work coaches in food banks.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Stephen Crabb): Work coaches in Manchester have been working with a food bank since October last year, and feedback shows that this service helps to signpost support for people to move into work and navigate the welfare system. I am particularly keen for all jobcentres to explore how they work with local initiatives in their communities.

Justin Madders: My local food bank, the West Cheshire Foodbank, has seen a 6% increase in usage in the past 12 months, including a disgraceful 13% more children coming to use the food bank over that period. Why has there been such an increase? Is that due to welfare benefit cuts, or does the Minister believe there is another explanation?

Stephen Crabb: I am happy to speak to the hon. Gentleman about the situation in his constituency, but the Trussell Trust recently found that there has been no overall increase in the use of food banks over the past 12 months. Indeed, the average price of food has fallen by 2.5% over the past 12 months, and average wages have gone up. We continue to spend more than £80 billion on working-age benefits to support those in need.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): When I visited my food bank in Rugby I saw advisers who were meeting people’s individual needs and making a big effort to understand the circumstances of the people there, and to provide help, support and some direction. Is it not entirely right that that should happen?

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend is right. I have been a trustee of a food bank, and I know a bit about how they work on the ground. Effective food banks are those that partner other organisations, such as Citizens Advice and Christians Against Poverty, to provide debt advice and other support to help tackle the underlying causes of why somebody might be at a point of crisis and dependency and need to use a food bank.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Latest Trussell Trust data show a 2% rise in food bank use over the past year. Is the Minister proud of that?

Stephen Crabb: The Government take this issue very seriously, and one thing I am proud of is that we are spending more than £80 billion on working-age benefits, which is the mark of a decent, compassionate society. At the same time, we are working hard to improve the benefit system, precisely to help those who are most disadvantaged and at the greatest distance from the labour market, to give them a much better chance of leading fulfilling lives.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to Department for Work and Pensions questions for, I believe, the first time. I am sure he will make a huge impact. He certainly did when I worked with him—[Interruption.] I do not know what Labour Members are shouting about. Does the Secretary of State recall that when the Labour Government were in power, the existence of food banks was more or less covered up? Since the coalition Government, and now this Administration, came into office, we have advertised and helped food banks to exist and to help those most in need.

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I am not interested in playing politics. I am encouraging more than 700 jobcentres around the UK to explore fully how they work in partnership with local community initiatives, so that the third sector, working with work coaches, can provide the best possible support and advice to those who need it.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): When the Trussell Trust published the figures last month showing record food bank demand over the past year, it stated: “In some areas foodbanks report increased referrals due to delays and arrears in Universal Credit payments.”

What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that the introduction of universal credit does not drive food bank demand even higher?

Stephen Crabb: That is one reason why we are using such a careful and controlled timetable for rolling out universal credit. I am much more interested in it being rolled out safely and in a secure way, so as to avoid the kinds of problems that we had under the previous Labour Government, when tax credits were blasted out and huge numbers of people received overpayments and were required to pay back thousands of pounds.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What is the average length of time that a benefit recipient makes use of a food bank? Are we asking individuals who have successfully moved away from food banks what advice they would like to have received when they attended them?

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend makes a very good suggestion, and peer support and advice is one of the most effective things that can be provided for those who...
are making that transition from worklessness into work. Using some of the experiences and insights of people who have had to rely on food banks is important.

Disabled People: Benefits

2. Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect on disabled people of changes to benefits since 2012. [904878]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): The Government set out on 20 July 2015 our assessment of the impact of the welfare policies in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, with similar assessments for previous changes. Spending to support people with disabilities and health conditions will be higher in real terms in every year to 2020 than in 2012.

Steven Paterson: Once universal credit has been fully implemented, severely disabled people with no adult to assist them will be entitled to about £58 less per week than under the current system. Is the Minister concerned that young carers are likely to face considerable additional burdens as a result of the loss of the severe disability premium from about 25,000 disabled single parents?

Justin Tomlinson: I did not quite pick up all the hon. Gentleman's points, but a number of exemptions are in place. We continue to review the best way to protect vulnerable people. Universal credit will be a fairer, far simpler and far more supportive benefit. It will help people.

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): Will the Minister provide an update on the progress of the joint work and health unit, which is a very sensible way to join up parts of the public sector?

Justin Tomlinson: This is a significant part of our ongoing work to bring the two main Departments together to help create additional opportunities and support for colleagues. We will bring forward further details soon.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The fact is that analysis by the House of Commons Library shows that £1.2 billion of support to disabled people is set to be cut in this Parliament. Is this what the Secretary of State means about having a new conversation with disabled people?

Justin Tomlinson: Let me challenge the hon. Gentleman back on that. In my area, spending on personal independence payment and disability living allowance will be £16.6 billion, as compared with £12.7 billion under the previous Government. Overall, we spend nearly £50 billion a year on benefits to support people with disabilities and health conditions. That is rising every year to 2020. Record amounts of money are being spent.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I recently met Nick Gregory and his team at Grimsby Jobcentre, which serves my constituency. They are doing excellent work in getting disabled people and those with learning difficulties back into work. Will the Minister enlighten us on what further initiatives are planned?

Justin Tomlinson: It is great to hear about the fantastic work in my hon. Friend's constituency and I would like to meet him to discuss it further. We continue to upskill staff across the jobcentre network, increasing the number of disability advisers and making improvements to our Work programme and Work Choice programme.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): The Children's Society and Citizens Advice report that the families of about 100,000 disabled children, who currently receive support through DLA, are set to see that support halved under universal credit. That will have a real impact on their quality of life and longer-term life chances. With a new Secretary of State at the helm, Ministers have a chance to step back from the universal credit debacle. Will they look again at the impact on disabled children and look for fairer alternatives?

Justin Tomlinson: Again, I challenge the hon. Lady back on that. Any analysis of universal credit has to take into account the introduction of the national living wage, the extension of childcare, support for working parents and increases to the personal tax allowance. It is a simpler system. More generous childcare provision supports those who work for just a few hours and there will be a named contact. As we have previously set out, the PIP benefit system is far more generous than the old DLA system.

Dr Whiteford: The research of reputable organisations simply does not bear that out. The reality is that disabled children are not the only ones who will lose out under universal credit. A devastating report by the Resolution Foundation published just last week found that, even with tax allowances and the increase in the minimum wage, under universal credit half a million working families will be significantly worse off. Disabled people, disabled children and low-income working families—are these really the people the Tories want to target to pay for austerity cuts and tax cuts for the rich?

Justin Tomlinson: We are doing more to support working households. The proportion of people in relative poverty who live in a family with someone who is disabled has fallen since 2010. There are a number of exemptions to all our benefit cap and freeze announcements, including for those on PIP, DLA, industrial injuries benefit, attendance allowance and employment and support allowance. Following further talks, we will include carer's allowance and guardian's allowance.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Does the Minister agree that Disability Confident events can be crucial in this regard? I am holding my own event in Mid Dorset and North Poole, to which the Minister would be more than welcome to attend. Will he join me in encouraging all Members from both sides of the House to get involved?

Justin Tomlinson: So far, 22 MPs have held Disability Confident events, including a joint event between a Conservative MP and a Labour MP—there's a future coalition for you. Some 515 employers have registered
an interest in Disability Confident, up 169 since 23 March. We are getting over 100 registrations a month. This is all about creating additional opportunities for disabled people who are looking for work.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): What assessment has the Minister carried out into the £35 per week cut to ESA and its impact on levels of deprivation among disabled people?

Justin Tomlinson: When that was announced, a cumulative distributional analysis was also published that included the impacts of welfare spending, health spending, employment support and infrastructure investment, but let us not forget that only 1% of those on ESA were coming off that benefit—that was the case under our Government, the coalition Government and the former Labour Government. We have all tried to make changes but fundamental reform is needed, and that is what the Government will deliver.

Pension Schemes: Younger Workers

3. Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps he has taken to increase the number of younger workers subscribing to pension schemes.

16. Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): What steps he has taken to increase the number of younger workers subscribing to pension schemes.

18. James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): What steps he has taken to increase the number of younger workers subscribing to pension schemes.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Shailesh Vara): The Government continue to roll out the programme of automatic enrolment of all eligible workers into workplace pensions. Of those eligible workers, approximately half are under 40, and the largest increase in pension membership in 2015 was among those aged 22 to 29.

Nigel Mills: I welcome the progress the Minister has outlined. Now that we have announced the lifetime ISA, will he consider allowing people, especially young people, to be auto-enrolled into a lifetime ISA, rather than a pension, to give them a chance to save for a house and have improved financial resilience while they are young?

Mr Vara: The lifetime ISA can supplement somebody’s pension but is not a pension as such.

Andrew Bingham: Will my hon. Friend agree that the new state pension provides clarity for younger workers, who will now know what to expect from their state pension when they reach pensionable age? Will that not have a positive impact on how much they choose to save in a private pension, because, with this clarity, will come understanding and an ability to plan?

Mr Vara: I most certainly agree with my hon. Friend. The previous state pension system was extremely complex—it was difficult for people to know how much state pension they would get before they reached the state pension age—whereas the new state pension provides clarity from an early age as to what they can expect. In future, they will know that they can expect over £8,000 a year from the state—a solid foundation upon which to plan their own retirement savings.

James Berry: Having spent time with charities and high street banks in Kingston, I have been surprised by the low level of financial literacy they report, even among people with secondary and tertiary education. What steps will the Government take to ensure that young people receive the high-quality information and guidance they need, particularly on pension planning, which often feels a long way off to younger people?

Mr Vara: I thank my hon. Friend for that very good question. He will be aware that last October the Department and the Pensions Regulator jointly launched a refreshed communications campaign entitled “Don’t Ignore the Workplace Pension”, to help build on and maintain the success of the previous campaign in raising awareness of automatic enrolment. The campaign includes digital and social media advertising, as well as television and radio, and has helped to raise awareness and guide people towards further information.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It was pleasing to hear the Minister say that predictability and clarity were important in pensions. Will he apply those principles to the 2.6 million WASPI women?

Mr Vara: We have applied clarity, as I have said at the Dispatch Box on many occasions during the course of many debates.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The younger generation are more likely to be self-employed, and 15% of the workforce are now self-employed, yet only one third are saving into a pension pot. Will the Minister look at the recommendations from the Federation of Small Businesses, which is calling for incentives and support for self-employed pension provision?

Mr Vara: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point about a particularly important sector of our economy, and we will certainly look at anything put forward. I emphasise that the Government are keen to ensure that people, including the self-employed, think about and prepare for a better future in terms of their pension.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Pension saving has been undermined by the new lifetime ISA, a new gimmick from the Chancellor, which will promote ISA saving from taxed income over pension saving from pre-tax income—in other words, it is a convenient tool to increase tax receipts today. No employee will be better off saving into an ISA than through workplace pension saving. The Association of British Insurers has forecast that someone saving 4% of an income of £25,000 in an ISA would be £53,000 worse off by age 60. Will the Minister tell the Chancellor to stop his gimmicks, stop this nonsense and get back to pension savings? We need no more con tricks from this Government.

Mr Speaker: Order. The eloquence might be worthy of Demosthenes, but I think the length would not. Questions must be shorter.
Mr Vara: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman takes his usual hostile view to anything, without doing his research. Because of the auto-enrolment scheme pushed forward by this Government, there will be between £14 billion and £16 billion more in pension savings by 2020.

Long-term Youth Unemployment

4. Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): What recent progress he has made on reducing long-term youth unemployment. [904880]

The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel): Since 2010, long-term youth unemployment has halved, falling in the last year alone by 90,000. This Government are determined to support young people to improve their life chances and make sure that they do not slip into a life on benefits; rather, we will support them so that they are either earning or learning when they leave school.

Chris Skidmore: Since March 2010, with the help of organisations such as N-Gaged, a training provider that recently helped me find my first apprentice, long-term youth unemployment has fallen in Kingswood by 60%. Does my right hon. Friend agree that companies such as N-Gaged deserve congratulations on getting young people back into work? What more can be done to help training providers?

Priti Patel: That is a very good question, for which I thank my hon. Friend. He highlights the important role of training providers. They are the ones providing opportunities for young people to get their foot on the employment ladder and, importantly, to gain the skills and experience that employers are looking for. My message to him and to other employers is that I hope they will work in partnership with us so that we can encourage more of this activity.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): A young autistic constituent of mine was asked by his DWP work adviser what he enjoyed doing. He replied that he enjoyed being a DJ as a hobby. His reward was to have a demand for repayment of £7,000 in benefits, having been accused of working when he did the DJing as a hobby. Is that the type of understanding approach for autistic people that this Minister likes to see from people working for the DWP?

Priti Patel: First, I would be happy to look at the particular constituency case that the hon. Gentleman raises, but I would also say that our work coaches do a tremendous amount of work, supporting people in our jobcentres when it comes to employment and providing advice. I understand that he highlights a particular case, and as I have said, I would happy to look at the details of it, and perhaps give some guidance and advice to his constituent to support him in securing an employment outcome.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): On the subject of long-term youth unemployment. I was curious to know what our work coaches are doing to help young people get the softer skills they need to get into the workplace—CV preparation and so forth?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Our work coaches have a range of tools at their disposal, but they work with the individual and the young person to look at the skills they may not have but which they need to secure employment outcomes. Of course, we have extra adviser time to improve job-search skills, for example, as well as sector-based work academies and support to get people on to apprenticeship schemes. As I highlighted in an earlier answer, that means working with providers.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Prime Minister and Chancellor regularly tell us that the EU is good for jobs and prosperity. Will the Minister tell us about youth unemployment rates in the rest of the EU and whether or not the Government can learn anything from those other EU countries?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He will be aware, as will all Members, of the ongoing economic turmoil in the eurozone and the double-digit unemployment, which is really where the European Union is right now. The employment challenges that they face serve as a warning to us. I am delighted to say that the UK is a bright spot when it comes to employment, which is thanks to the long-term economic plan of this Government.

Mr Speaker: That was a very well informed answer, I am bound to say.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one way in which Members can help young people to find work is by hosting jobs and apprenticeships fairs? Does she look forward to the first-ever jobs and apprenticeships fairs in my Louth and Horncastle constituency on 2 September?

Priti Patel: I commend my hon. Friend for hosting that jobs and apprenticeships fair. She is absolutely right: such fairs provide a gateway for young people who are looking for work. I know that many Members on both sides of the House have been doing exactly the same, but I encourage all Members to bring employers together in their constituencies, and to give young people the opportunities that they are seeking.

Workless Households

5. Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made on reducing the number of workless households. [904881]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Stephen Crabb): The number of workless households has reached its lowest level since records began, and the latest figures show that it has fallen by more than three quarters of a million since 2010. That demonstrates that not only is our approach to the economy working, but, crucially, more families are benefiting from the security and dignity that work brings.

Andrew Griffiths: Does the Secretary of State agree that too many people are suffering as a result of drug and alcohol abuse, which is preventing them from returning to work? Does he agree that helping those people to become drug and alcohol-free is essential, and will he
visit the Burton Addiction Centre to see how we can transform lives, help people to become free of addiction, and get them back into work?

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend has asked an excellent question. As he probably knows, I visited the BAC O’Connor Centre in Newcastle-under-Lyme two weeks ago, and saw for myself a group of addicts in recovery who were making that difficult journey back into work. Many of those people are motivated by voluntary work placements and the goal of achieving a paid job when they finish. Their dream is getting into paid work, and the work of rehabilitation and recovery centres like BAC O’Connor Centre is crucial in that regard.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State accept that even in areas where unemployment levels are lower than they have been recently, high levels persist in some wards? Will he agree to work with Labour’s newly elected Welsh Assembly, and to note the position in the Flint Castle ward in my constituency? The level of unemployment there is still high, but Welsh Assembly policies have helped to reduce it over many years, and Labour was rewarded with a good victory last Thursday.

Stephen Crabb: The right hon. Gentleman knows very well that I have a pretty good track record of working with the Welsh Government, whoever is in power. As for his important point about entrenched and persistent poverty, it is absolutely right for us to take account of that. We will shortly be launching a life chances strategy in which, for the very first time, the complex underlying factors that lead to persistent pockets of entrenched poverty in wards such as those to which he has referred will be genuinely addressed.

Older People: Employment

6. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What steps is he taking to increase the number of older people in employment.

The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel): There are now 9.6 million workers aged 50 and over in the United Kingdom, an increase of 1.3 million over the last five years. The Government are, of course, doing much to support older workers. We have, for instance, removed the default retirement age, allowing people to choose when to retire.

Sir David Amess: Bearing in mind that the Leader of the Opposition and I both have a vested interest in the future of older workers, will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the fact that the number of unemployed people in Southend has fallen by 37%, and will she ensure that we maintain policies to secure that downward trend?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I know that unemployment rates are plummeting in his constituency, among others. The Government are focusing on, and committed to, delivering first-class support to all age groups, particularly employment support.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Statistics published last month show that more than 600,000 people in their 50s and 60s are helped into work through the tax credit system, which provides vital in-work support. How many of those 600,000 will be eligible to receive in-work support under universal credit?

Priti Patel: As the hon. Gentleman will know—because we have discussed the issue, and because it has already been raised in questions today—universal credit is a simpler benefit, which provides much more targeted support to help people into work while also securing long-term job outcomes. As I have said, when it comes to older workers, we are committed to delivering first-class support for people of all ages, including older workers, and working closely with them to secure employment in the long run.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On the basis of that answer, it would seem that the Minister has as good a grasp of numbers as the Minister for Schools has of words. Let me try to give the right hon. Lady some assistance. Perhaps it would help if she read the Resolution Foundation report. The answer is that one third of working families on tax credits—that is 200,000—will not be eligible for any support under universal credit, and another 200,000 will lose £2,000 a year. Will the Minister tell us why this Government are so intent on attacking older people in work?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is now speaking about older workers as well as working families. We need to look at universal credit in the context of the support that it provides. He also mentioned the Resolution Foundation report, which failed to take on board various factors such as childcare support for working families and the ongoing support that universal credit and our work coaches provide to working families.

Work and Health Programme

7. Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): What recent progress has he made on the Work and Health programme.

The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel): Development of the Work and Health programme design is well under way, including engagement with a wide range of stakeholders. The Department has commenced the commercial process for the programme by releasing the prior information notice for potential providers on 28 April.

Melanie Onn: A constituent of mine was volunteering last year at Green Futures, a social enterprise. That was directly related to his degree subject. While he was applying for work, the jobcentre put him on the community work placement scheme, saying that a voluntary placement would be better for him if arranged through the jobcentre. A private company paid by the jobcentre then arranged a six-month unpaid placement at the very organisation he was already volunteering with. Does the Minister agree that this is an utter waste of taxpayers’ money? How can she guarantee that this sort of incompetence will not be repeated under the new scheme?

Priti Patel: I would be very happy to look into that particular example. The hon. Lady has highlighted a practice that clearly needs to change. The Work and Health programme will be designed to support claimants with health conditions and disabilities who have been
unemployed for at least two years, but, as I have said, I shall be very happy to look at the case that she has raised.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows that one of the key challenges in supporting autistic people into work is ensuring that we identify what works. There are very few data on work outcomes for autistic adults. Can she assure me that the new Work and Health programme will record whether someone on the programme is on the autism spectrum, so that we can track whether the programme has been successful for this very important group?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend raises an important point. I would like to assure her that, in designing the new provision, we are working at local level on harnessing expertise as well as engaging with a wide range of stakeholders. By doing that, we shall be taking on board important lessons from the overall Work programme and Work Choice as well as looking at how we can achieve sustained long-term employment outcomes.

State Pension Reform: Gender Inequality


The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Stephen Crabb): Last month, we introduced a new simpler state pension as part of our wider package of pension reform. The combination of the new state pension, automatic enrolment, the triple lock, the protection of benefits and giving people power over their pension pots will ensure that pensioners, male and female, will have greater protection, security and choice in retirement.

Hannah Bardell: Protection is all very well, but introducing the new state pension in 2016 means that 350,000 women who were born between 1951 and 1953 will retire on the old system just before the new provisions come into force, whereas a man born on exactly the same day will retire slightly later but receive a pension under the new arrangements. Will the Minister please heed the Scottish National party’s calls to establish a pensions commission in order to end these inequalities?

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Lady was not here in the last Parliament when we debated and voted on these changes. We debated them at enormous length and a clear decision was made by Parliament. As part of that, a concession of more than £1.1 billion was introduced to limit the impact of the rising state pension age on those women who would be most affected. Let us be clear: there is no party in this Chamber that has a clear preference or change.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Two weeks ago, the Labour Front-Bench team held constructive talks with the co-founders of the Women Against State Pension Inequality, or WASPI, campaign. We will work together to find a fair solution to the injustice that they and hundreds of thousands of women face as a result of the Government’s state pension reforms, and my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State has suggested six of them. The Secretary of State said that he would meet the WASPI women, but he also said that there were no plans to change the policy. Why is the Secretary of State going into that meeting with a closed mind? By doing so, will he not just repeat the mistakes of his predecessor?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): The Department has set clear requirements regarding the professions, skills, experience and training of the health professionals that providers can use to carry out PIP assessments. We expect the highest standards from the contractors who carry out assessments on our behalf, and measure their performance against several targets, including quality and customer experience.

Christina Rees: My constituents have reported huge inaccuracies between the information that they provide against PIP descriptors and the conclusions drawn by Capita’s staff, which causes great stress for people already in difficult circumstances. What is the Department doing to ensure that Capita’s staff are trained to take the appropriate time and care over assessments, so that they are as accurate and as fair as possible?
Justin Tomlinson: All health professionals must be registered practitioners and must have met the requirements for training competence. They must also use their expertise in disability to provide advice on people’s level of functional ability and the impact on their day-to-day lives. A team of experts provides additional support. We also work regularly with a wide range of stakeholders to help to advise on where further improvements can be made.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister will be aware of the recent Public Accounts Committee report on the process of contracting out disability assessments. Does he agree that the recommendation to publish regular contractor performance data is one way of ensuring that assessments are professional and effective?

Justin Tomlinson: I know that that Committee did some valuable work in that area, which was partly why we had the extensive independent review of the performance and management of PIP that was carried out by Dr Paul Gray.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The Minister’s response to my letter and that of my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State following the shocking revelations of last month’s “Dispatches” on personal independent payment assessments was complacent to say the least. Given the evidence not only from “Dispatches” but from the Public Accounts Committee in March and from the National Audit Office in January, all of which raised concerns about the quality of PIP assessments, when will the Minister investigate the matter and review Capita’s contract?

Justin Tomlinson: I gave a crystal clear, comprehensive response in the Westminster Hall debate, and I am sorry that the hon. Lady was obviously somewhat distracted. It is crystal clear that the individual in that film, who acted disgracefully, has rightly been removed. Progress in training and policies is being reviewed weekly. We have zero tolerance of such behaviour.

People with Autism: Work

10. Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to help people with autism find work.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): Working with the Autism Alliance, we are training a network of over 1,000 autism leads in Jobcentre Plus and developing an autism passport to record condition details and reasonable adjustments. In addition, Access to Work now has a hidden impairments specialist team to support people better, including those on the autistic spectrum.

Mr Sheerman: Will the Minister wake up and shake up his Department, because autistic people have a great deal of talent that gets wasted in this country? Only 15% of children on the autism scale end up working in a full-time job, so is it not about time that we took this seriously? I am a member of the newly formed Autism Commission, and we will help the Government, on a cross-party basis. Let us wake up to this tremendous potential, which is unexploited.

Justin Tomlinson: I agree 100% with the hon. Gentleman, who has a formidable track record of work in this area. The Department has put in place the Think Autism strategy and the autism taskforce, and we are working with the leading organisations. Only two weeks ago, I attended a constructive round-table meeting with the National Autistic Society, where there was a real focus on getting more employers to offer opportunities to take advantage of the huge wealth of talent that these individuals offer.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Does the Minister think that the closure of Remploy factories—every one of them—three years ago helped people with autism, and those with other disabilities, to find work?

Justin Tomlinson: The independent review stated that that move needed to be made. Through our specialist employment training programme, we will be offering twice as many job outcomes, which is what we need to do, as part of our commitment to halving the disability employment gap.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Following the success of national autism awareness month, it was good to see the Government announce a taskforce to explore access to apprenticeships for those with learning disabilities, which will be led by the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard). I am aware that there is not a formal consultation period, but the British Association for Supported Employment has been asked to provide evidence to the taskforce by 13 May. Does the Minister agree that as many people and organisations as possible should feed into the taskforce’s work, to ensure that everyone has access to a life-changing apprenticeship?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Lady for the constructive engagement. I am keen to listen to as many experiences from different organisations as possible. This is an incredibly important area of work for me, and I would be very happy to have a meeting with her if she would like to contribute.

State Pension Age: Women

11. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): If his Department will introduce transitional protection for women adversely affected by changes in the state pension age.

12. Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): If his Department will introduce transitional protection for women adversely affected by changes in the state pension age.

19. Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): If his Department will introduce transitional protection for women adversely affected by changes in the state pension age.

21. Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): If his Department will introduce transitional protection for women adversely affected by changes in the state pension age.
22. **Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): If his Department will introduce transitional protection for women adversely affected by changes in the state pension age.

**Mr Speaker:** Well, if the reference were to the Government as a collective, that would be another way—

**Mr Skinner:** Exactly.

**Mr Speaker:** That would render it orderly. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) for proffering advice, especially from a sedentary position.

**Mr Vara:** With permission, Mr Speaker, I will take the hon. Lady’s reference, “from one Minister to another” slightly broadly and remind her that, following the passing of the Pensions Act in 1995 there were 13 years of Labour government during which a succession of Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions and pensions Ministers did absolutely nothing to try to alter the system that she and her colleagues now seek to change.

**Barbara Keeley:** While Ministers do nothing, my constituents and other people are really suffering. My constituent, a woman born in the 1950s, told me:

> “I feel anxious and distressed about how I am going to manage without an income in what has been, for my generation, the expected retirement age.”

It is six months since we had our first debate on this, so will the Minister and the Secretary of State now commit that civil servants will assist with costing the various options for transitional arrangements that have been put forward by Labour?

**Mr Vara:** The hon. Lady asks for a costing. During the 2011 debate the cost was calculated to be £1.1 billion, and there is no intention to revisit the issue.

**Paula Sherriff:** Does the Minister accept that there were significant failures from his own Department to communicate the changes to the state pension age, and does he think it unacceptable that some women found out about the changes only months before they expected to retire?

**Mr Vara:** In 2012, a survey compiled by the Department for Work and Pensions found that only 6% of women who were due to retire within 10 years thought that the pension age was still 60. Moreover, in 1995, people were able to ask for an estimate of when they were likely to retire, and in 2011 more than 5 million people were sent a letter to the address that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs then had informing them of the changes.

14. **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): With an all-party group on the WASPI campaign being set up later this week, will the Secretary of State confirm that he is willing to meet a cross-party group of MPs and some members of the campaign to discuss the matter further and to open up some good communication?

**Mr Vara:** I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is more than happy to meet the all-party group. I know that he, like the rest of us, has met some members of the campaign in his constituency, but he is certainly keen to meet the all-party group.
 Disabled People: Work

13. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps he is taking to assist disabled young people into work.

Justin Tomlinson: Last year, Access to Work supported record numbers of young disabled people to start or retain work. In partnership with Volunteering Matters, the DWP has supported the implementation of job-shadowing work-placement opportunities for young disabled people. The programme encourages employers to see the many benefits of employing disabled talent.

Luke Hall: Will the Minister update the House on what action is being taken to help disabled people into work, specifically through apprenticeships?

Justin Tomlinson: Following my visit to Foxes in Bridgwater, where a staggering 45.6% of its young adults get into paid sustainable employment, I now recognise that vocational pathways are important for many young disabled people, especially those with learning disabilities. Therefore, I and the Minister for Skills have asked my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) to lead a joint Department for Work and Pensions/Department for Business, Innovation and Skills taskforce to increase access to apprenticeships for young people with learning disabilities. In addition, in recognition of what the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) said, the taskforce will in future look at opportunities in apprenticeships for people with autism and other hidden impairments.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): My constituent has had her higher rate of disability living allowance removed, leaving her effectively housebound, which makes it almost impossible for her to find work. Until she exhausts all her appeal rights, she has had her Motability car taken away. Will the Minister agree to meet her to discuss what transitional support may be available to her and to the many people whom this will affect across the country?

Justin Tomlinson: We have seen 22,000 more people access the Motability scheme since PIP was introduced. There is an opportunity for a mandatory reconsideration and then an independent appeal. Those who are not successful do get to keep the car for a further seven weeks and have up to £2,000 to put towards buying that car or making alternative arrangements.

Universal Credit

15. Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What estimate his Department has made of the number of families in which one or more people are in employment who will receive less support under universal credit after moving from tax credits.

Neil Coyle: A single parent on universal credit who works full time will be up to £3,000 worse off than someone in the same situation on tax credits, as a result of cuts that are taking effect from April next year. How many single parents working full time—doing the right thing, in the Government’s vernacular—in Bermondsey and Old Southwark does the Secretary of State expect his cuts to affect, and by how much does he intend to make them worse off?

Stephen Crabb: I will repeat the point that people being moved from tax credits to universal credit will have transitional protections. The hon. Gentleman is making the mistake that so many of his colleagues have made of trying to compare the present position, falsely, with the previous situation under tax credits. Let us not forget that when tax credits were set up, there was no national living wage, child care support was not at the same level, and there were not higher rates of personal allowance. We are transforming the landscape of support for people on lower incomes.

Benefit Claims

17. Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to increase the accuracy of decision making during the initial assessment and mandatory reconsideration phases of benefit claims.

The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel): The Department has a range of quality measures to drive improvements in the accuracy of decision making. Of course, we are committed to getting our decisions right. There will always be more opportunities to learn when decisions are overturned on appeal. We feed back on every single case.

Colleen Fletcher: The latest figures show that 75%—75%—of PIP appeals heard by Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service were decided in favour of the appellant in Coventry. These figures clearly demonstrate the flawed and draconian nature of the original refusal decisions made by the Department for Work and Pensions. Will the Minister assure me that further improvements will be made to the DWP decision-making process to increase accuracy and prevent more vulnerable people from being forced to go through the appeals process needlessly?

Priti Patel: I would make two points to the hon. Lady. First, the Department has a range of quality measures to drive improvements in the accuracy of decision making. Secondly, I understand from my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People that only 2% of decisions on PIP claims are changed, and that is on the basis of new evidence being submitted.

Topical Questions

T1. Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Stephen Crabb): As part of our reforms to give people greater confidence and certainty about what they will receive in retirement, we are improving the help on offer to people
with keeping track of their previous workplace pension pots. I can inform the House that our new online Pension Tracing Service goes live today. This new service will make it simpler and quicker to reunite people with information about their lost pension pots; it will take a matter of seconds, rather than days, as under the old system.

Andrew Bingham: I welcome enabling people to find their old pension pots, but what more can the Secretary of State do, and we do, to enable people to understand how much they are likely to receive from those pension pots, when they have found them?

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend asks a good question. Many of our reforms of the state pension are designed to make things simpler and less confusing for people. Since the new state pension was introduced in April, everyone has been able to get a personalised state pension statement, based on the new rules, and there is a new online service, “Check your State Pension”, which offers a quick and accessible way for people to access information about their state pension.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his first DWP questions. He has started today by trying very hard to strike a different tone from his predecessor. He said in an interview last week that he wanted his Department and his Ministers to understand the “human impact” of their policies. What does he think the human impact will be of his policies to cut £50 billion supporting disabled people—far more than was ever spent under the previous Labour Government.

Owen Smith: The Secretary of State seems to have forgotten already that in his very first speech he said that behind all those statistics are human beings. Disabled people will be disappointed that today he hid behind statistics once more and that he will not reverse the ESA cuts. Others will be disappointed that he refused today to address the concerns of women born in the 1950s, and still others that he has refused to address the cuts to in-work benefits under universal credit. In what way is the Secretary of State different from his predecessor?

Stephen Crabb: We are a Government who have helped deliver the changes that have seen a huge fall in workless households. Nearly half a million more children are growing up in a home seeing a mum or a dad go out to work. There is no reason to change policies that are changing things for the better for those who have least in our society.

T4. [904905] Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): Last week I had the honour of attending the national Young Enterprise tenner challenge final where two students from my local school, Mangotsfield school in my constituency, Archie Kenway and Joel Vadhyanath, received an award for turning £10 into a staggering profit of £3,289. Does my right hon. Friend agree that initiatives for young people such as the tenner challenge could help ensure that young people acquire valuable skills for the future in the workplace?

The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel): I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend, who highlights not only the entrepreneurial spirit of those two young people but what we are doing in government through, for example, the new enterprise allowance, which has seen more than 80,000 businesses start up over the past five years.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): Since PIP was introduced 22,000 more people have accessed the Motability scheme, so I do not recognise the hon. Lady’s account.

T6. [904907] David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): The business case for universal credit identifies savings of £80 million a week in steady state after implementation. These come both from IT simplification and from the removal of barriers to getting back into work quickly. Will the Secretary of State confirm that there is a focus not just on delivering the technology, but on ensuring that those benefits will be delivered when the time comes?

Stephen Crabb: Since I was made Secretary of State for Work and Pensions I have made a number of changes to the way in which the roll-out of universal credit is overseen in the Department, stressing the importance of a careful and controlled roll-out. The one outcome that matters for everyone is that people get their benefits paid on time and correctly, and our approach is making sure that that happens.

T3. [904904] Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Resolution Foundation has calculated that universal credit could leave 2.5 million families on low pay worse off by more than £3,000 a year. Does the Minister agree that universal credit is abjectly failing to provide incentives to work and lift families out of low pay, which we were told was its intention?

Stephen Crabb: As I said to David Willetts from the Resolution Foundation, the author of the report, and as I say to every Member who seeks to criticise universal credit, “Go to your local Jobcentre Plus, go and sit with the teams of work coaches who are rolling out universal credit, and you will see the enthusiasm and the motivation as they see universal credit transforming people’s lives for the better.”

T7. [904908] Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): In anticipation of the White Paper on disability, will my hon. Friend embrace Leonard Cheshire’s Change100 programme, which allows disabled graduates to gain paid employment with major employers?
Justin Tomlinson: That is a fantastic initiative. I work very closely with Leonard Cheshire. It is exactly the sort of programme that should help shape our plans to help disabled people access work.

T5. [904906] Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I recently asked a written question about the equality analysis that was carried out on the PIP consultation documents, and I was astounded to find out that the Department has only to pay due regard to the equality aspects of decisions, and that it was up to the Department to decide whether to publish that analysis. Does the Secretary of State agree that in the spirit of full transparency equality analyses must be published and made publicly available?

Justin Tomlinson: We also have the independent reviews. The previous one was carried out by Dr Paul Gray and we will be looking to do a further review. Let us not forget that under PIP 22% of claimants access the highest rate of benefit, compared with just 16% under disability living allowance.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): A constituent of mine has multiple sclerosis and, for the past nine years, acting on the advice of her council, she has used her disability living allowance to pay the mortgage on the family’s adapted bungalow. She has now been informed that, with PIP, she will no longer be able to do that, and she and her family risk losing their home. The change could have a devastating impact on many families up and down the country. Will the Minister look into the matter and ensure that this scenario does not happen?

Justin Tomlinson: I would be happy to look into the details, but local authorities do have access to the £870 million for discretionary housing payments. We have also regularly updated the guidance for local authorities to help such individuals.

T8. [904909] Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Government intend to replace the current statutory child poverty measures with new measures of life chances. Researchers at the London School of Economics analysed responses to the Government consultation on child poverty measurement and found that 99% of respondents believed income and deprivation should be included. Does the Minister agree or disagree with them?

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Gentleman is wrong to try to focus on divisions between the Treasury and the DWP. When a Department such as the DWP spends between a quarter and a third of all taxpayers’ money, we need to make sure that it is working closely aligned with the Treasury to achieve the things we want to achieve as a Government.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I have a constituent, Lisa, who has spina bifida; she suffers constant pain and balance problems, and she needs a walking stick. She was forced to struggle 25 metres from the reception area to an assessment centre. How can the Minister explain how that contributes to intergenerational fairness?

Justin Tomlinson: First, any claimant who has difficulty attending an assessment centre can request a face-to-face assessment in their own home. Secondly, with regard to how far somebody can travel in an assessment, this is not just a black-and-white issue of 20 metres: it is about whether they can do that safely, repeatedly, to an assessable standard and in a reasonable time. If a claimant is unhappy with a decision, they can ask for a mandatory reconsideration or an independent appeal.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): One of my constituents who works 16 hours a week and is a carer for a disabled relative has discovered that because of the living wage she no longer qualifies for carer’s allowance, leaving her with a substantial shortfall. Why on earth have this Government forced her and thousands of others into this desperate situation?

Justin Tomlinson: We as a Government spend £2.3 billion a year in supporting the invaluable work that carers do in this country. The impact of the national living wage will always be reviewed.
Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): One hundred and forty thousand pensioners who paid into occupational pension schemes, including those of Allied Steel and Wire in my constituency, have been done a historical injustice by losing out on the full amount they paid in and are entitled to. Will the new Secretary of State meet the Pensions Action Group and representatives of those pensioners to discuss their concerns?

Stephen Crabb: I have met the action group on previous occasions. We continue to look at all these issues. The hon. Gentleman is aware that other very high-profile cases are currently looking for the support of the Pension Protection Fund.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Physical inactivity costs the UK some £8 billion. I had an excellent meeting with the Secretary of State’s predecessor before he decided to leave the job. May representatives from Leeds Beckett University, which does wonderful work in this area, and I have a meeting with the Secretary of State to discuss this?

Stephen Crabb: I would be very happy to meet them.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): The Secretary of State is reportedly set to reduce the benefits cap by up to £6,000 per year. Who does he think will miss out most from this? Does he think that private landlords with out-of-control rents will just accept £500 a month less, or that children, who have no control over any aspect of their lives, will be the ones to suffer yet again?

Stephen Crabb: The changes to the benefit cap have already been legislated on and passed by this Parliament. I urge the hon. Lady to look at the results of the earlier changes to the benefit cap, which have had really positive outcomes in encouraging and supporting more people into work.
Safety in Custody and Violence in Prisons

3.39 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will make a statement on safety in custody and violence in prisons.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Andrew Selous): Before I move on to the substance of the question, I would like to update the House on events that occurred at Her Majesty’s Prison Wormwood Scrubs over the weekend. On the morning of Friday 6 May, prison officers refused to enter the prison, citing health and safety grounds. Later that day, an agreement was reached between the National Offender Management Service and the Prison Officers Association. All officers have returned to work, and the prison is running a normal regime. The National Offender Management Service and the Prison Officers Association are jointly committed to resolving any outstanding health and safety concerns at HMP Wormwood Scrubs. On Sunday 8 May, two members of staff at Wormwood Scrubs were assaulted and taken to hospital for treatment. We do not tolerate any violence against our hard-working officers. The alleged perpetrator now faces a police investigation that could lead to criminal charges.

Moving on to the wider question, I take safety in prisons very seriously. Reducing the harm that prisoners may cause to themselves or to others is the Government’s top priority in prisons. The most recent statistics on safety in custody show that levels of self-inflicted death, self-harm and violence in prison are too high. The figures demonstrate the very serious challenges facing the prison service. There is no single, simple solution to the increase in deaths and violence in prisons. Those trends have been seen across the prison estate, in both public and private prisons and in prisons both praised and criticised by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons.

We have already taken a number of steps to address the problems. We have recruited 2,830 prison officers since January 2015; that is a net increase of 530. We are trialling the use of body-worn cameras in prisons. We are strengthening the case management of individuals who risk harming others. We have introduced tough new laws under which those who smuggle packages, including packages containing new psychoactive substances, over prison walls will face up to two years in prison. We have reviewed the case management process for prisoners who are assessed as being at risk of harm to themselves, and we are implementing the recommendations.

It is, however, clear that we must do more. We need to reduce violence and prevent drugs from entering prison. We must do better at helping prisoners with mental health problems. We must ensure that prisoners can be rehabilitated so that they are no longer a danger to others. That is why the Government are committed to fundamental reform of our prisons. We have secured £1.3 billion to modernise the prison estate, and we will give greater autonomy to governors so that they are truly in charge. I look forward to setting out our plans in greater detail shortly.

The problems are deep-seated, and there are no easy answers. However, I assure the House that the Government will not waver in their determination to reform our prisons, so that they become places of decency, hope and rehabilitation.
Andy Slaughter: I thank the Minister for that response, but I fear that it was exactly what we have heard time and time again at the Dispatch Box. I hope that he will concede that the situation in our prisons on the youth estate is very serious, and that the recent incidents are part of a pattern of unacceptable conditions and unacceptable violent behaviour. It cannot be right that prisoners, staff and, ultimately, the public are at risk from the Government’s failure to get a grip on the crisis in our prisons. That makes it all the more surprising that the Secretary of State is not here today. We are all, whatever our view, engaged in the referendum campaign; that is no reason for him to neglect his responsibility as Secretary of State.

Yesterday, as the Minister said, two prison officers were hospitalised after being assaulted while they were on duty at Wormwood Scrubs prison in my constituency. Our thoughts are with them and their families. That is a reminder of the difficult and dangerous job that officers do every day, often hidden from the public gaze and without the acknowledgement that they deserve. The attack was entirely predictable—so much so that two days earlier, as the Minister acknowledged, 70 members of staff at Wormwood Scrubs had walked out because they did not feel safe. Although Tornado officers were sent into the prison on Saturday, they were withdrawn on Sunday, which was when the attacks happened.

What specific steps are being taken to ensure safety in HMP Wormwood Scrubs? I am told that drugs, phones and even knives are being thrown over the walls because of insufficient patrolling of the grounds and cell searches caused by insufficient staffing numbers. Will additional officers be provided to undertake these basic tasks until order is restored and a review of staffing at this and similar prisons is undertaken?

What happened at Wormwood Scrubs is not an isolated incident; it is typical of the dangers and problems across the prison and youth estate. In the past few days, reports on Lewes and Leeds prisons have told a similar story. Last week, it was revealed that the Department is about to take over the management of Medway secure training centre following the “Panorama” exposé of the appalling conduct of G4S and some of its staff in running that institution, including allegations of serious violence against children.

Fourteen prison staff are assaulted every day. There were 4,963 assaults on staff by prisoners in 2015, compared with 3,640 in 2014, which is a 36% increase in attacks. Prisons are now violent and dangerous places. Serious self-harm and suicides are at record levels. We have heard for a year that the Government wish to transform our prisons, but words are no longer enough. Now is the time for action before more prisons become ungovernable and there are more serious injuries or—God forbid—the death of an officer on duty.

Andrew Selous: This Government are not in denial about the situation, we have not been idle in seeking to address it and we do not lack vision or political will on the issues that the hon. Gentleman has quite rightly raised. I assure him that the Secretary of State takes this issue extremely seriously, and it is our top priority as far as prisons are concerned.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that the work that prison officers do—day in, day out—across our country is, by its very nature, hidden from public view. They are outstanding public servants who do amazingly good work, which, unfortunately, is not seen or perhaps not as fully appreciated by most of us as it should be.

The nature of the offenders in custody has changed. Today, about 30% more people are sentenced to prison for violent offences, and prisoners often act more spontaneously and more violently to achieve their objectives than they did in the past.

On recruitment, I repeat what I said: we have been recruiting at full strength for the past two years. We have recruited an extra 2,830 officers since 2015, and we are continuing to recruit at that level to make sure that our prisons are adequately staffed.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): The Minister knows that we are gradually understanding more and more about the violence that affects our prisons. Violence can sometimes be due to the inappropriate handling of prisoners with mental health problems or, indeed, those on the autism spectrum, and just small changes can make a difference to the behaviour of such individuals. Does the Minister welcome the National Autistic Society’s initiative for some of our prisons to have autism awareness accreditation, particularly Feltham young offenders institution, where it is making a difference, and will he assure me that he will look at fully rolling out this programme across the prison and custody system?

Andrew Selous: First, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for her extensive knowledge of this issue and, indeed, for the legislation that she initiated in this House. It was a great pleasure to visit HMP Feltham with her. I can tell the House that Feltham is now the first autism accredited prison in the whole world, which is something I am extremely proud of. This good work must not stop at Feltham: we need to spread it across the prison estate. She is absolutely right that this is one part of reducing violence across the estate.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Inspectors have warned of “Dickensian squalor” inside Wormwood Scrubs, following a scathing report that revealed that the jail is rat-infested and overcrowded, with inmates spending up to 22 hours a day locked in very squalid cells. Overcrowding and poor conditions exacerbate the risk of violence not only to staff but to other prisoners. It is clear from a recent statement from the Prison Governors Association that understaffing is still an issue. Will the Minister assure us that the ideological drive to cut public services and to shift to private sector provision will not further jeopardise staff and prison safety?

Will the Minister also look to the example of the Scottish Government? Their approach of recommending a presumption against shorter sentences of three months or under has led to the numbers of such sentences plummeting, and the reconviction rate is at a 16-year low. Will he take steps to follow their lead in creating a presumption against short sentences and investing instead in robust community sentences in order to address the underlying causes of crime more effectively?

Andrew Selous: I visited HMP Wormwood Scrubs a week or so ago. We have an excellent new governor in the prison, who has a good record and I believe has the
best possible chance of making sure that it improves on those issues. There are 15 officers over and above the benchmark level within Wormwood Scrubs. The drive to greater governor autonomy will help to deal with a number of the issues. The Government are currently consulting on sentencing issues.

**Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for the interest he has in prison security, and, indeed, for the action he has taken on it; the Justice Committee shares his interest. Today I met the prisons and probation ombudsman, who told me that on current estimates 61% of inmates take psychoactive substances. What consideration has my hon. Friend given to enlarging smoke-free zones in prisons, and to what extent does he feel that that might help with the problems?

**Andrew Selous** (Con): My hon. Friend, who is very knowledgeable on these issues as a member of the Select Committee, is absolutely right to point the finger at the terrible damage caused by new psychoactive substances. I agree that rolling out smoke-free prisons across England and Wales will help us to reduce that damage—we know that those psychoactive substances are sometimes smoked openly, with prisoners pretending that they are smoking tobacco. I am with her in wanting to see the roll-out progress, but we will only do that in a measured and safe way.

**Keith Vaz** (Leicester East) (Lab): The independent monitoring board for Leicester prison published a damning report about conditions there this morning. The report pointed to all the matters that the Minister has raised—rising levels of violence, use of drugs and mental health issues. This issue is about increasing staffing. Although the Government have increased the number of prison officers, there are clearly not enough. What further steps can be taken to help the officers at Leicester prison?

**Andrew Selous** (Con): My commitment to the House is to carry on recruiting at the increased level of activity that there has been for the past few years. It is proving successful. It is a challenge, at some specific sites in London and the south-east more than at others, but we are managing to make progress. There is the budget to carry on employing prison officers and I am determined to carry on with our recruitment objectives.

**Mr Speaker**: I call Alex Chalk.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): My question was already ably asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis).

**Mr Speaker**: What an extraordinary and novel development—an hon. Member who does not indulge in superfluous repetition. The hon. Gentleman is in danger of winning a medal. It is an extraordinary development, and very welcome, I am sure.

**Lucy Frazer** (South East Cambridge) (Con): The Minister mentioned the importance of dealing with mental health in prisons. On Friday I met a justice of the peace in my constituency who talked about the good work done by the liaison and diversion services. He encouraged me to encourage the Minister and the Secretary of State to extend those services and ensure that more community orders have as a condition that people get the help they need.

**Andrew Selous** (Con): My hon. and learned Friend, who is also extremely knowledgeable on these issues, is absolutely right. The Government are committed to making sure that there is universal access to a mental health assessment from the moment that anyone encounters the criminal justice system. I also point her to the co-commissioning that is going to happen between governors and NHS England on mental health and drug abuse services. That will also be very beneficial.

**Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough) (Lab): I have no doubt that the Minister wants to sort this problem out, and his account of a passion for reform, decency and hope was compelling, except for the fact that it has not worked. Since 2012, the number of assaults in prisons has doubled, as have the number of assaults on staff. Although he talked about recruiting more staff recently, total numbers of staff have fallen. Those staff are frightened—brave prison officers are scared to go to work. What can the Minister say to stop them feeling frightened?

**Andrew Selous** (Con): The right hon. Lady is right to say that confidence is an extremely important commodity as far as the day-to-day work of prison officers is concerned. She has been involved with these issues for many years, and she will know that the Prison Service has been affected in a major way by waves of drugs. In the early 1990s, and before that, such things had serious implications for prisons, and led to riots and serious assaults in high numbers. We have a two-year violence reduction project. It would not be helpful now to give the House a shopping list of individual measures, but detailed, serious work is taking place across the estate, including the violence diagnostic tool and many other measures to help back up hard-working prison officers. The body-worn camera initiative is also proving valuable, and we hope to say more about that soon.

**Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the prevalent use of lethal highs, in particular “spice”, in HMP Northumberland in my constituency, is one clear cause of the increase in violence and unpredictable behaviour among our prison population? What are we doing to try to reduce dramatically the numbers of those goods?

**Andrew Selous** (Con): It was a great pleasure to go round HMP Northumberland with my hon. Friend not long ago, and I commend her for calling these terrible drugs “lethal” highs. From 26 May they will all be completely illegal when the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 is enforced. That is very welcome, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right. We will not waver in our determination to crack down on those substances.

**Ian Lavery** (Wansbeck) (Lab): I thank the Minister for an amicable meeting last week about HMP Northumberland. The common denominator throughout the whole prison estate across the country is simply a lack of manpower. That is causing the violence—whether it be prisoner on prisoner or prisoner on staff—mental health issues and the problems with alcohol, “spice” or
whatever. The Minister has said that this issue is challenging. What extra measures can he take to ensure that plenty of staff are employed in prisons to maintain a safe environment for everybody on the prison estate?

Andrew Selous: My door is always open to the hon. Gentleman, and if he has further concerns about HMP Northumberland, I am happy to come and see me again. If we analyse what has happened across the prison estate, we see that the increase in violence has taken place in prisons where there has been an increase in the number of officers and in prisons where numbers have stayed the same, and where there have been reductions. He is right to say that we need adequate levels of staff, which is why I give him the commitment that I have already given the House that we will carry on recruiting at our current level, which included a net increase of 530 officers last year.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I have asked the Minister to come and visit young offenders at Portland, and I hope he will do so shortly. There was an unpleasant riot the other day, and prison officers were put in danger. I pay credit to all prison officers who work like a forgotten army behind the scenes. Portland is a fairly old structure, and the number of floors—there are four or five—is a particular concern because there are not enough officers to man them all at the same time. That puts those officers at risk, and allows prisoner free rein where they perhaps should not have it. Will my hon. Friend look at that issue and increase the number of prison officers at the young offenders institution as fast as we can?

Andrew Selous: It would be a pleasure to visit HMP-YOI Portland with my hon. Friend. Friend in due course and I note what he says about the design of that particular prison. The £1.3 billion commitment provides the Government with the opportunity to get the best design knowledge from around the world to ensure that the new prisons we build are as safe as possible. That will also enable us to cease to operate some prisons where assaults and bullying take place in part because of poor design.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): In the first five years of this Government, the number of prison officers fell by 41%. In the sixth year of this Government, assaults on prison officers rose by the same percentage—41%. The Minister mentions that prison officer numbers are increasing, but he uses a figure based on the past couple of years. Will he tell me how many prison officers there were in 2010 and how many there are today?

Andrew Selous: I do not have those particular figures to hand for the right hon. Gentleman. Although my memory is that he has asked me that question before and that I have written to him with the answer. I will dig out the letter I sent to him; maybe it went astray. Speaking as a current prisons Minister to a former prisons Minister—I know he cares as deeply about these issues as I do—he will know that these issues are not easy. He knows that his own Government faced considerable difficulties on exactly the same issues. What is not in doubt is this Government’s utter determination, through the prison reform programme, to get on top of them.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman was chuntering repeatedly from a sedentary position that he knew the answer to his own question, which is probably very wise and knowledge of which will enable us all to sleep much more soundly in our beds tonight.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for his work as prisons Minister. He takes his role extremely seriously. I think my constituents will be very surprised to hear quite how much stuff is being thrown over prison walls: mobile phones, drugs, lethal highs and knives. Surely in 2016 we have the ability to stop this happening, or at least to minimise it? What plans does the Minister have to tackle this issue?

Andrew Selous: These issues are not easy. Our prisons are not like the Eden Project: they do not have a dome over the top of them. Unfortunately, it is all too easy to get things over a prison wall, as I saw when I went around HMP Rochester last Thursday morning. My hon. Friend raises an important issue. All of us, particularly as Members of Parliament, have a role in getting the message out in our communities that new psychoactive substances are lethal. They do terrible harm to the loved ones of families who inadvertently bring them into prisons. We need local communities to work with us and the police to try to stop the terrible flow of evil drugs over prison walls.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Minister is absolutely right: prison officers do an exceptionally difficult job. They need and deserve our fullest possible support. That has to be more than a platitude. For that to be the case, staffing levels have to be addressed. The other issue that has to be addressed is prison overcrowding. The prison population is now in excess of 90,000 inmates. In the past 15 years, the length of sentences has gone up by 33%. Can the Minister assure me that, as he tackles this issue, he will look at it in the round; that he will look not just at prisons in isolation but at how they interact with police, prosecution and court authorities?

Andrew Selous: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his praise for the work of our outstanding prison officers. We are consulting on sentencing issues, which have a bearing on overcrowding. We are also determined to bring down reoffending. Our success in reducing reoffending will help to reduce overcrowding.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I thank the Minister for his comments today and for his support with regard to our concerns about HMP Rochester and the Medway Secure Training Centre. I also thank him for his very speedy meeting with me and the governor of HMP Rochester earlier this year. The Minister will know that Medway Secure Training Centre was at the centre of abuse allegations. Will he confirm when the Medway improvement board report will be published? My constituents want reassurance that action and improvements have taken place, so that young people are safe in Medway.
Andrew Selous: I commend my hon. Friend for her serious interest in and support for the three prisons in her constituency. I was in HMP Rochester on Thursday morning, and I commend, in particular, the outstanding work of its governor and head of security to combat the constant pressure of drugs coming into the prison. On Medway STC, about which we will be saying more shortly, the Secretary of State and I have met Dr Gary Holden and the Medway improvement board, which was appointed by the Secretary of State. We will be making further announcements on its findings in due course.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): A constituent came to see me this weekend to express her fears for her son. He is in prison and every day she expects to get a phone call saying he has been murdered. What reassurance can the Minister give my constituent that prisoners, while serving their time, do not live in fear of their lives?

Andrew Selous: The whole prison reform agenda speaks directly to the issue of violence. Our vision for prisons is one where prisoners engage in meaningful, relevant education and in skills training that is linked to skills needed in the local community and which will help them to get a job. Our vision also includes a commitment to keeping family relationships strong. If we can do those three things, we will reduce frustration, levels of violence and the number of assaults.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Wormwood Scrubs has been described by the Prison Officers Association as “flooded with drugs, mobiles phones and weapons” and by the chief inspector as having cells so bad you would not keep a dog in them. Does the Minister still think that this prison is fit for purpose?

Andrew Selous: HMP Wormwood Scrubs is an older, Victorian prison facing various challenges. I went around it recently, and as I said, I have confidence in its very good new governor. The hon. Lady mentioned mobile phones, which we have not talked about much so far. As the Prime Minister announced on 8 February, we are committed to working with the mobile network operators, which also need to rise to their responsibilities to help us fight the scourge of mobile phones in prisons.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): In the last four years, there has been a rise in levels of violence against prison officers owing to understaffing and the fact that there are not enough rehabilitation programmes. Is it not time to re-evaluate how we decide who to send to prison and, when we do send them to prison, to make available proper rehabilitation provision?

Andrew Selous: Decisions about who goes to prison are obviously for our independent judiciary, but the hon. Lady is absolutely right about the need for better rehabilitation. We are determined that time in prison is not wasted but is productive, relevant and beneficial to prisoners and to the wider community in terms of keeping us all safe when they come out.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Parc prison in Bridgend has an excellent reputation for its rehabilitation work, including its drug rehabilitation work, but it needs the support of the local police force, South Wales police, if it is to tackle the smuggling in of drugs and the throwing of drugs over the wall. It gets that help. What is the Minister doing to make sure that police forces across the UK work with their prison forces and officers? The number of attacks on prison officers and by prisoners on prisoners is increasing, and unless prisons work with police forces to arrest those guilty of smuggling drugs into prisons, we will be wasting our time.

Andrew Selous: I thank the hon. Lady for praising the work of HMP Parc in her constituency—in particular, I would praise the outstanding family work done by Corin Morgan-Armstrong—and I am grateful to her for raising the issue of good co-operation with the local police. I am pleased it is working well in her area, but she is right that it varies across the country. It is an issue that I take extremely seriously and about which I have regular conversations with the policing Minister.

Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It is no mystery why assaults on prison officers, assaults between prisoners and suicides have increased in prisons. Only last week, a report came out showing that every factor had gone up. It is no surprise when staff are cut by a third. I was very pleased to listen to the Secretary of State and I applauded him, but I am disappointed that he is not here today. The vision for the future is good, and I support it, but we cannot wait for jam tomorrow. We need more action now. We are still 7,000 down on staff numbers. We need an increase in the number of officers now. It is not safe for them to go into work now, and it is not safe for the prisoners themselves. We need more action today. I ask you what you intend to do now as a matter of urgency?

Mr Speaker: I intend to do precisely nothing, other than to ask the Minister to tell the House what he and the Government will do.

Andrew Selous: The hon. Lady is a member of the Select Committee, is very knowledgeable and takes these issues extremely seriously. One issue not yet mentioned today is that we are significantly improving prison officer training. It has increased from six to 10 weeks, and we are providing officers with the additional skills they will need to be able to cope. Training on its own, of course, is not enough, which is why I reiterate to the hon. Lady the commitment I have made several times today to carry on recruiting at the rate we are recruiting to get up to the benchmark level. In December 2014, the number of vacancies for prisoner officers was 5%; it is now 2%, and I want to see it at 0%.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I have heard these sort of remarks from the Minister so many times—too often to have any confidence that he is going to do anything at all about this problem. It is a problem of this Government’s making, when they let far too many officers go in the first half of the last Parliament. Now the Minister’s problem is not just about numbers; it is about the experience of staff. We now have experienced inmates and inexperienced staff—and this is what happens as a result. What is the Minister going to do not just to get the number of officers in, but to ensure that they are properly trained, supported, mentored, developed and assisted in their early years of learning jail-craft? If he carries on as he is now, these problems will never be resolved on his watch.
Andrew Selous: The hon. Lady is right about the importance of jail-craft. I point her to the recent chief inspector’s report on Glen Parva prison, in which it was noted that the new officers were treated as an asset because of their enthusiasm and the new skills that they brought, rather than being viewed as in their probationary period and thus not able to add very much. If establishments get the right attitude and use the enthusiasm of the new recruits, it will be helpful.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): This is an interesting debate, particularly when we discuss how people on all sides are affected, whether they be people working in prisons, prisoners themselves or their families who are worried about the conditions within the prisons. In common with my hon. Friend for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), I have had constituents coming to see me to make representations about Strangeways prison in Manchester. They fear that the culture is not in place to ensure that mental health is something to be dealt with positively by the prison rather than simply being controlled because of the Minister’s targets.

Andrew Selous: I recently visited HMP Manchester in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, and I would like to pay tribute to the outstanding work of prison officers there, facing some challenging prisoners. We are absolutely committed to improving mental health in prisons. NHS England is taking on an extra 20 case managers this year for adult secure services. We have co-commissioning coming up, and we take mental health issues extremely seriously.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The Minister is well aware of the Justice Select Committee’s inquiry into prison safety, which addresses the issue of violence. Members might have noticed that on Friday, the news slipped out that the Medway Secure Training Centre, which was mis-run by G4S, has now come into Ministry of Justice hands. The next day, a report came out on Rainsbrook, showing endemic use of force and restraint. Surely the logical conclusion is that the MOJ should now take over Rainsbrook private youth prison.

Mr Speaker: Order. I have a strong sense that Members will be approaching the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee to seek a debate on these matters. I say that because quite a lot of what we have heard has been nearer to debate contributions than to questions. I hope I can make that point gently.

Andrew Selous: No Governments comment on leaks, wherever they come from. We will have more to say about Medway in due course, and, indeed, about all three secure training centres, because, as the hon. Lady has said, some of the issues that apply to Medway are clearly relevant to all of them.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) mentioned “spice”. Officers at Holme House prison, which is in my constituency, have ended up on sick leave because of the effects of smoke from this substance. Others have been injured while trying to deal with violent prisoners, some of whom are taken to hospital after using the substance, thus putting officers and health staff at risk. When will the Government put the right systems in place to stop such substances getting through security and into prisons?

Andrew Selous: We are investing in new technology, and we are trialling a full body scanner to detect “spice”, “black mamba”, and other types of new psychoactive substance which are concealed within the body. I believe that the smoking ban will help in time, once it has been rolled out to prisons in the hon. Gentleman’s area and throughout the country. Unfortunately, as he will know, “spice” is often smoked openly by prisoners pretending that it is tobacco.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Prison officers at HMP Lancaster Farms, in my constituency, will have observed the events at Wormwood Scrubs over the weekend with trepidation, because the situation there is reflected across the country. The situation at Lancaster Farms was so bad that prison officers went to the local paper to expose the issue of drugs in prisons and the need for more officers. Will the Minister commit to putting more money into prison staffing so that staff can go to work and feel safe?

Andrew Selous: I should point out to the hon. Lady that the Prison Officers Association reached an agreement with the National Offender Management Service. We will definitely keep all the issues at Wormwood Scrubs under review, and, as I have said, we are continuing to spend more money on prison officers in order to recruit up to the benchmark. We are continuing to recruit at the rate at which we have been recruiting for the last few years.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I share the concern expressed by many other Members about prisoners with mental health issues, the risks that they pose not only to themselves but to others and the effect of staff cuts on that situation.

I have corresponded with the Minister about a constituent of mine who has endured a lengthy bureaucratic process relating to his potential transfer to a secure mental health unit that would be more adequate to his needs. I am sorry to say that his family received a call this month telling them that he had killed himself, only to be told half an hour later that he had not. That is an extraordinary situation. I should like the Minister to investigate it fully, and also to look very closely at the case that is being made for my constituent to be transferred from HMP Birmingham, where he is currently being held.

Andrew Selous: I apologise to the family, through the hon. Gentleman, for the fact that they were given such terrible news, which clearly was not true. If the hon. Gentleman wants to write to me again about the issue, or even to come and see me about it, I shall be more than happy to discuss it further with him.
4.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Nicky Morgan):

With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement on all schools becoming academies.

In our White Paper “Educational Excellence Everywhere”, published in March, I set out the Government’s vision of continuing the rise in educational standards in England during the rest of the current Parliament. We are committed to building on the reforms of the past six years, which have led to 1.4 million more children being taught in good and outstanding schools. However, we are not content to stop there: 1.4 million children is a start, but it is not enough. We must ensure that we deliver a great education to every single child, because we owe it to the next generation to give them the tools that will enable them to realise every ounce of their potential.

The White Paper was called “Educational Excellence Everywhere” for a reason. As I have said before, for me the “everywhere” is non-negotiable. In the White Paper, for example, we set out our plans for “Achieving Excellence Areas”, where we will focus specific resources on tackling entrenched educational underperformance. The White Paper also sets out how we want to see the teaching profession take responsibility for teacher accreditation, tackle unfair funding, build leadership capacity and set high expectations for every child, with a world-leading knowledge-based curriculum in a truly school-led self-improving system learning from the best from across the world and preparing the next generation to compete on the global stage.

It is the vision of a fully academised system that has attracted the most attention. Over the course of the last few weeks, I have spoken to many hon. Members on both sides of the House, as well as to school leaders, governors, local government representatives and parents. It is clear from those conversations that the strength and importance of academies is widely accepted. There is a clear recognition of the case for putting greater responsibility on the local level. It is clear, because of the considerable risk to the standard of education that young people in those schools receive, that if we are to meet our ambition of continuing the rise in educational standards in England, it will become increasingly difficult for local authorities to provide for schools in local authorities likely to become unviable. So instead of taking a blanket power to convert all schools, we will seek powers in two specific circumstances where it is clear that the case for conversion to academy status is pressing.

In our worst performing local authorities, we need to take more decisive action so that a new system led by outstanding schools can take their place. Similarly, because of the pace of academisation in some areas, it will become increasingly difficult for local authorities to offer schools the necessary support, and there will be a need to ensure that those schools are not dependent on an unviable local authority.

We will therefore seek provisions to convert schools in the lowest performing and unviable local authorities to academy status. In some circumstances, that might involve the conversion of good and outstanding schools when they have not chosen to do so themselves. However, the need for action in those limited circumstances is clear, because of the considerable risk to the standard of education that young people in those schools receive, as the local authority is either unable to guarantee their continued success or support further improvement. We will consult on these arrangements, including the thresholds for performance and unviability, and I am making a clear commitment that the definition and thresholds of underperformance and viability will be the subject of an affirmative resolution in this House.

I would also like to reassure hon. Members in regard to concerns about how we protect small schools, particularly those in rural areas. I have already made it clear that no small rural school will close as a result of the move to have more schools becoming academies. There is already a statutory presumption against the closure of rural schools, but we will now go further. Where small rural schools are converting to academy status, we will introduce a dual lock to ensure their protection: both local and national Government will have to agree to a school closing before a decision can be made. There will also be dedicated support to help rural primary schools during the process of conversion, and a £10 million fund to secure expert support and advice for them.

While we want every school to become an academy, we will not compel successful schools to join multi-academy trusts. In order to share expertise and resources, we expect that most schools will form local clusters of multi-academy trusts, but if the leadership of a successful
school does not wish to enter a formal relationship with other schools, we trust it to make that decision and will not force it to do so. Small schools will be able to convert to stand-alone academies as long as they are financially sustainable.

I began this statement by saying that our goal has not changed. This Government will continue to prioritise the interests of young people and getting them the best start in life by having an excellent education over the vested interests who seek to oppose the lifting of standards and the rooting out of educational underperformance. Those very same vested interests allowed schools to languish for years unchallenged and unchanged until the launch of the sponsored academies programme by the last Labour Government.

Our work to improve our education system will continue apace. We will continue to empower school leaders and raise standards. We will continue to hold high expectations for every child. We will establish a fair national funding formula for schools, so that young people everywhere get the funding they deserve. We will continue to work towards a system in which all schools are run and led by the people who know them best, in a way that works for their pupils, as academies. The reforms will transform the education system in our country and ensure that we give every child an excellent education, so that they have the opportunity to fulfil their potential. I commend this statement to the House.

4.26 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for advance notice of her statement. It is good to see that, despite her best efforts, this U-turn is getting the airing it deserves today. What she announced on Friday was a significant and welcome move, I thank the broad alliance who joined us in making the arguments: the head teachers, who made their collective voice clear last weekend, parents, governors, teachers, local government leaders, and hon. Members from across the House, who made thoughtful and important interventions over recent weeks. Given the scale and breadth of the opposition to her plans and the huge sense of panic and upheaval that they caused school leaders, the Secretary of State might have shown a little more humility in her statement today, if I were her, I would at least apologise.

After the Secretary of State’s statement today, we are all left even more confused about what her policy actually is. She says that her aim remains the same, but without the means. Although she has conceded on the politically daft idea of forcing good and outstanding schools to become academies against their wishes, she still holds the ambition that all schools will become academies, but she failed to make a single decent argument as to why that ambition is desirable in the first place. Perhaps this is because, despite her claiming to be in listening mode, the Secretary of State has her fingers in her ears and is out of touch with heads, parents and teachers.

The Secretary of State has failed to address the serious concerns that have been raised. Where is her evidence that academisation is the panacea for school improvement? Where is the choice, autonomy or innovation in a one-size-fits-all approach? Is there sufficient capacity and accountability in the academies system to ensure that best practice, not poor practice, is being spread? Those questions remain as she seeks further powers to speed up the pace of academisation.

On school improvement, the Secretary of State must now take stock of the evidence. The Education Committee recommended that she do just that. Sir Michael Wilshaw found serious concerns in many chains. Research by the Sutton Trust found a mixed picture of performance in academy chains. There is no evidence at all that academisation in and of itself leads to school improvement. Indeed, analysis published today by PwC shows that—[Interruption.] Government Members might want to listen to this. The analysis shows that only three of the biggest academy chains got a positive value-added rating and—this is quite startling—just one of the 26 biggest primary sponsors achieved results above the national average. While there is much excellence, the Secretary of State must not continue making dubious arguments about cause and effect without the evidence.

The concerns about a “one-size-fits-all” policy, as expressed by Councillor Paul Carter, chair of the County Councils Network, still apply, as do those about “distant, unaccountable bureaucracies” expressed by the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Brady). As Lord Kenneth Baker said, there are real issues on the capacity within multi-academy trusts to take on a new wave of academies. Today, the Secretary of State also failed to answer the key question of parents and their right to remain on governing bodies of academies.

Perhaps the biggest concern we all have is about the Secretary of State’s direction and her fixation with structures not standards. While chaos reigns all around her, and while heads are dealing with what they describe as “very challenging times”, she wants to put all the energies of her Department into more structural change, for which there is little evidence, insufficient capacity and inadequate accountability. Would she not be better advised sorting out the utter chaos besetting primary assessment and standard assessments tests, ensuring the massively behind-schedule new GCSEs are delivered well and on time, dealing with the chronic teacher shortages she has caused or getting a proper strategy for local place planning? Alternatively, instead of simply doing the Chancellor’s bidding, perhaps she could fight for some school budgets, which are facing real-terms cuts for the first time in 20 years. We all want to see educational excellence everywhere, but the Secretary of State is presiding over a chaotic mess, dragging schools backwards, and her ambitions for further structural change are at best a distraction—at worst they will damage standards.

Nicky Morgan: The shadow Education Secretary was as constructive and positive as always, but let me deal with some of the issues she raised. She asked about the support for academies. She will know about this, if she has read the evidence before the Select Committee on Education, where we went through this in great detail. I am sure she has also seen the very long letter I sent to the National Union of Teachers
about the international evidence, but let me just give two statistics: primary sponsored academies are making substantial gains, with the percentage of pupils achieving the expected level in reading and writing and maths at the end of key stage 2 having risen by four percentage points last year; and those academies open for just one academic year having seen their results improve by five percentage points. She asked about the views of the chief inspector—[Interruption.] I am sure that if she has—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to Members on both sides of the House that there is far too much noise. Both sides and every Member must be heard. It is very simple.

Nicky Morgan: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. It is extraordinary how some people do not want to hear any arguments against them, for example, from Sir Michael Wilshaw. The hon. Lady will have seen the letter from Ofsted in which he said: “As you know, I fully support the government’s ambition to create a more diverse and autonomous school system. As I said in my latest Annual Report, academisation can lead to rapid improvements and I firmly believe that it is right to give more autonomy to the front line.”

The hon. Lady mentions the Education Committee report from 2014, published last year, which said:

“Academy sponsorship has encouraged and facilitated the contribution of individuals not previously involved in education provision and laid down a challenge to maintained schools to improve or face replacement by the insurgent academy model.”

It is extraordinary that it took until the hon. Lady’s final sentence for her to talk about standards. As usual, there was no mention of pupils, of standards or of aspiration. She has had nine months to set out a vision of what a strong, consistent education system looks like. I have set out ours very clearly in this White Paper and she now needs to do the same if she is to have any hope of office.

We know what today’s Labour party is all about—it is about taking sides. That is what Labour told us in the local elections and it is what its leader is all about. Today, Labour has picked its side: the side of vested interests in the status quo; the side of no change; the side of those who want to push back the tide of progress and return to Labour’s bad old days. I say no. We pick the other side: the side of parents, teachers and, above all, pupils; the side of higher standards and aspirations; and the side of progress and reform—the side of educational excellence for all.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): The chief inspector of schools has already been cited this afternoon. I draw the attention of the House to his report of 2013 in which he referred to the “long tail of underachievement”. He cited the big problem of having too many primary schools coasting and not delivering adequate teaching in maths and English and in other subjects, and many of those schools are in local authority areas that could improve generally. It is absolutely right therefore to focus on those local authorities and make sure that we do deliver for our young children, most of whom do not go to academies at primary school, because there are not enough primary schools in that category. I welcome this statement to focus on the schools that really matter and, above all, on the local authorities.

Nicky Morgan: I thank the Chair of the Education Committee. It was a pleasure to visit a school in his constituency of Stroud recently. I know that he is absolutely committed to the lifting of educational standards for all young people. Is it not telling that, rather than working with the Chair of the Education Committee, the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) just tries to shout him down?

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for today’s statement. Many school communities will also welcome today’s announcement. Although I, like many teachers across these isles, would love to think that the Government do listen to teachers, the reality seems to be that this embarrassing U-turn on a centrepiece Budget announcement has been brought about by a handful of the Government’s own Back Benchers. Those who have the greatest impact on the success of a school are teachers, and a first-rate headteacher can turn a school around regardless of whether it is an academy, but there is no doubt that this grand plan has caused great anxiety, and teachers who are already struggling with severe workload issues have had an additional burden placed on them by the academisation plan. The Secretary of State says that academies allow schools the freedom to innovate with the curriculum—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Austin, you are as noisy now as you were in the debating chamber of the University of Essex student union where you noisily, belligerently and discourteously heckled me 30 years ago. [Interruption.] Order. The hon. Lady—and all Members—must be heard with courtesy. May I gently say to her that her chance of getting a courteous hearing will be increased if, rather than making a statement, she asks a question?

Carol Monaghan: The ability of schools to set their own pay scales will raise questions around teachers’ pay and recruitment, and there is concern that the long-term impact of academies will mean higher salaries and better terms and conditions in some better-funded academies. What consideration—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hooray!”] I am glad that I amuse the House. What consideration has the Secretary of State given to teacher recruitment in poorer areas in terms of being able to attract the teachers they need to raise attainment? We in the Scottish National party are firmly committed to national bargaining in the public sector. How will she ensure that, by abandoning nationally agreed pay scales, this will not affect recruitment and retention in more challenging schools?

Nicky Morgan: I thank the hon. Lady for her long question. I agree that the most important thing we can do in our classrooms is to ensure that the quality of teaching is at its absolute highest, which is why we have more teachers in our schools than we have ever had before.

On recruitment, let me say that, if the hon. Lady has the chance to read the White Paper, she will find a lot of answers to her questions. There is the introduction of “Achieving Excellence Areas”, the introduction of the National Teaching Service, the setting up of career progression for teachers, and the support for a college for teaching. Let me also say to her that, in Scotland, there are now fewer teachers than there were when the SNP came to power and a bigger gap between the
advantaged and the disadvantaged. With the election of Ruth Davidson as an MSP and the fact that our party came second in the polls, her party will now be held to account.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Members who came into the Chamber after the statement started—there were quite a number of them—should not expect to be called. In pursuit of a question, with a question mark at the end of it, I turn to the éminence grise of the Government Back Benches, Sir Alan Duncan.

Sir Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Very grise, Mr Speaker. It is a matter of regret that on such an important issue, the shadow Secretary of State rather let herself down this afternoon. Those of us involved with this issue have expressed concerns—about compulsion, of course, but also about planning for school places, transport across changing catchment areas, and what happens when a failing school has no suitable academy to take it over. The House is grateful to the Secretary of State for having listened, and we urge her to look at what might be described as the final pieces in the academisation jigsaw. We very much appreciate the tone and the constructive nature of her statement.

Nicky Morgan: I thank my neighbour and right hon. Friend for his question. He raises important issues that we have addressed in the White Paper, in the sense that we highlighted that there are difficult issues around place planning and transport, and that we need to work with local authorities, the Local Government Association and others to make sure that we get this right. Ultimately, if schools are autonomous, we have to trust the frontline to deal with those difficult issues.

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): How much scope is there for local government or community involvement in new multi-academy trusts?

Nicky Morgan: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. The answer is: a lot. In the White Paper, we set out the plans by local authorities—two, certainly—for multi-academy trusts. Many of them are already exploring spinning out their services, as well as setting up multi-academy trusts. There are limits on the ownership that they are able to take. A lot of local authorities are exploring the option of setting up a trust in which the heads of the schools own part of the trust. That is a strong model, and it builds on the great collaboration that we already see in our education system.

Mr Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the very constructive approach she has taken throughout this debate. I particularly welcome her recognition that stand-alone academies, or small multi-academy trusts, can have the benefits of autonomy, while keeping schools in touch with the communities they serve.

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for the conversations that we have had. I know that he is absolutely committed to high educational standards. He is extremely fortunate to represent a very high-performing local authority. He and I both want all children in the country to have the same opportunities as children in his constituency.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State might know that in the early days of the idea of academies, I was of some help to the then Government in refining their method, and it was a good method: where schools were failing, we used academies to make sure that we ended that quickly. The method that the Secretary of State is extolling is a perversion of the academy model that we introduced. I say in sorrow rather than anger that the model of education that she is giving this country is doomed to fail.

Nicky Morgan: This model of education is giving 1.4 million more children the opportunity to be in a good or outstanding school. We want to go further.

Mr Speaker: I call Chloe Smith.

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. [Laughter.] I am delighted to be picked from among the serried ranks of excellent Back Benchers. Evidence such as the social mobility index sadly shows that my constituency has some of the poorest opportunities for the poorest children. May I urge the Secretary of State to stick to her guns, and to ensure that her focus is on standards for those who need it most?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend. She is absolutely right to say that this is about higher standards for all, but particularly for those for whom education is the great life transformer that will set them up for life. If we do not get this right, we are losing out as a country, and children are losing out. She and I have discussed the opportunity for her area to take part in the “Achieving Excellence Areas” pilots, and I look forward to discussing that further.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Some colleagues have a quaint idea about time-keeping. One hon. Member who was six minutes late has still not taken my hint. I do not wish to embarrass the poor fella, but he should not be standing. It is pretty straightforward.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am pleased that the Secretary of State is not sticking to her guns, and I welcome her change of heart and the U-turn that she has announced. Will she reconsider another ill-advised proposal in the White Paper—the abolition of the requirement for schools to have parent governors?

Nicky Morgan: The right hon. Gentleman and I discussed this when I gave evidence to the Education Committee. We have been very clear that there is a role for parent governors. We expect trust boards to have parent governors, but we also think that that is not the only way for parents to be involved and that much better, more meaningful engagement can be achieved.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): Following on from that, I thank my right hon. Friend for listening to the arguments for not compelling academisation, but...
because parent governors are so vital to the excellence of schools—I have worked with some brilliant parent governors—how will my right hon. Friend ensure that parental input continues? That is part of excellence.

Nicky Morgan: We are making it an expectation that parents will be heavily involved, not just through being governors, but through, for example, parent councils, as my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) set out recently, and the parent portal. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) is right to say that parent governors make a huge contribution to schools. I happen to know that because I am married to one of them.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I feel rather embarrassed for the Minister as the Government tried to sneak through this U-turn during one of the most racist campaigns that we have ever seen in the capital. Toby Young admitted that he had been arrogant and regretted criticising teachers, state schools and local education authorities. Will the Minister acknowledge that the teachers, the Labour party, the students and the parents were right, and she was wrong?

Nicky Morgan: I think the hon. Lady rather let herself down by that patronising question, if I may say so. I have been very clear all the way along, since the first day of my appointment, that the most important people in our education system are the teachers. The quality of teachers is the single most important thing that attracts and helps young people meet standards. If any Minister puts forward any proposals, we are likely to hear comments, but that does not mean that we should not put proposals forward. That is not the kind of person I am. I said last week that I was not going to leave the job half-done; I am not going to leave the job half-done.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s comments on the support for small rural schools, and her commitment to a funding review. Does she agree that a funding review delivers the opportunity to address the deep unfairness in the funding system that has left schools in places such as Cornwall underfunded for far too long?

Nicky Morgan: We remain committed to a national funding formula review. It cannot be right to have 152 different local formulae operating across the country. As I have talked about having a strong, consistent education system across the country, that must mean that we have a strong, consistent funding system too.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): Can the Minister specify why she objects to the line put across in The Times today by PricewaterhouseCoopers—presumably, a vested interest—who argue that academisation is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for school improvement, or is evidence utterly irrelevant?

Nicky Morgan: Plenty of evidence can be cited in favour. I point the hon. Gentleman to the PISA and the OECD evidence, which I have already talked about, which sets out clearly the benefits of autonomy in our school system.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for listening to Back Benchers on this issue. She knows that I have been a vocal critic, but I found her willingness to engage with us on the issue most refreshing and I am grateful to her for that. Can she confirm that she will continue to engage with parents and teachers as she pursues our vision to improve education for every child, regardless of background?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend raises an important point. It has been a pleasure to talk to him and all colleagues on both sides of the House. I look forward to continuing that conversation.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I am proud to represent a town that has some of the best schools in the country. My concern about the Secretary of State’s announcement is that it does not answer the questions that schools of all kinds—academies and local authority schools—and parents ask me. What parents say is, “How can we guarantee that there is a school place for my child nearby?”, and what schools say to me is, “How can I guarantee that there is a good quality teacher in front of every class?” We have not heard a solution to either of those problems. What does she offer?

Nicky Morgan: I think the right hon. Lady needs to read the White Paper. Let me also point out that we have the highest number of teachers ever in the profession, and we have created 600,000 more school places since 2010. When the Labour party was in power, it took 200,000 places out of the system at the time of a baby boom.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): May I join colleagues—

Fiona Mactaggart: Give us an answer!

Graham Stuart: I think you have had your question. May I join colleagues in congratulating the Secretary of State on her statement and on the way in which she has engaged with colleagues on both sides of the House? The Education Committee described the healthy tension between local authority schools and academy schools, which has contributed to 1.4 million fewer children being at weak schools. Does the Secretary of State agree that if local authorities that do manage to deliver outstanding schools and excellent overview and intervention, they can continue?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for the conversations we have had. Yes, of course—this is all about lifting standards and making sure no child is in a school that is failing or underperforming. Of course, if a child is in a good school being supported by a strong local authority, I want the authority to get on with doing that.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The chief inspector said he looked forward to a more diverse system, but how will changing all schools to the same system, as in the Secretary of State’s vision, make things more diverse? How will killing off the alternatives—our local education authorities, which are being denied the funds to provide the services that have improved schools in boroughs?
such as mine—facilitate improvement in the future? Lastly, what will happen to schools that are languishing in poor, failing academy trusts?

Nicky Morgan: I think there were three questions in that one question, but I will give the hon. Gentleman, who is a member of the Education Committee, the benefit of the doubt. First, let me answer his last question. We take swift action in any academies that are failing. Regional schools commissioners have already brokered over 100 schools and issued 94 warning notices. However, the hon. Gentleman’s question shows a worrying lack of understanding of what we are doing. There has been a one-size-fits-all system—and that was local education authority control. We are now saying that there will be freedom for schools to decide the right future for them; that could be continuing in a strong, supportive local authority, but it could also be converting into a stand-alone academy or joining a small local cluster, a bigger multi-academy trust or a diocesan trust. Schools are free to make the decision that is right for them and their pupils.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): May I also welcome the Secretary of State’s readiness to listen to colleagues? An Ofsted report earlier this year on the standard of provision by the local authority in Portsmouth is damning, with generations of children having been let down. The Conservative-led city council has made some important changes, and a new director of children’s services is beginning to make a difference, but does my right hon. Friend agree that she must have the powers to intervene where local authorities are failing?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we cannot stand back where local authorities are not providing sufficiently strong and effective school improvement. She is right to talk about the generations of young people who have been failed. It would be utterly irresponsible for the Government to let that continue on our watch.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): Opposition Members are absolutely committed to high standards in schools, and the Secretary of State does not aid the debate by turning it into an unnecessarily partisan attack on the Opposition. The title of her White Paper is “Educational Excellence Everywhere”. Does she really believe that a one-size-fits-all approach is best for education everywhere? Is it not time to follow the example of other parts of the Government and to look at devolution, so that more decisions are made at city region or county level, and fewer in her Department?

Nicky Morgan: The second half of the hon. Gentleman’s question was a lot more constructive than the first. I go back to what I said to the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns): we are not having a one-size-fits-all system—we had one, and it was called local education authorities. We now have a system where schools can decide their future, either on their own, or working in clusters or with the diocese. I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is on our side on raising standards, and I hope he can speak to other Opposition Members about that.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and for listening to colleagues on academies. After all, the purpose of a White Paper is to listen and to debate. Does she share my disquiet about the approach and language adopted by some of the teaching unions and Labour Members in railing against all academies, despite the clear evidence that, in the main, they work?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend. I well remember visiting an excellent academy in his constituency that was full of innovation, vigour and creativity, and absolutely on the side of the pupils there. Yes, I am concerned that some people so want to talk about structures that they have completely missed everything the rest of the White Paper says about teaching, leadership, standards, curriculums, and funding.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Just two weeks ago at Prime Minister’s questions, the Prime Minister confidently declared that forced academisation would be in the Queen’s Speech, and yet today we have this U-turn. Why has it taken the Government so long to listen to education professionals, teachers, parents, the Labour party, and even their own Back Benchers?

Nicky Morgan: At Prime Minister’s questions the Prime Minister talked about academies for all and education for all, and that is exactly what we are going to see.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The shadow Secretary of State said that there is no evidence that academisation, in and of itself, improves performance, but does the Secretary of State think that the increased autonomy that is inherent in the structure of academies does improve performance, as set out not only in the PISA report that she mentioned but in the McKinsey report of 2010?

Nicky Morgan: I entirely agree with my hon. and learned Friend. We have been very clear that just calling a school an academy does not automatically raise standards, but academies are the vehicle by which those working in them have the creativity to innovate with the curriculum, to set flexibility for pay and conditions, and to collaborate more freely with other schools. That is exactly what academy schools are doing, and is why standards are going up.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah—I call my University of Essex contemporary, Mr Ian Austin.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The PISA figures actually show that we are going down the international league tables as standards among our competitors rise much more quickly than here in the UK, so it is an absolute tragedy that the Secretary of State spends so much of her time on partisan bickering and a dogmatic obsession with structures. The best way—the quickest way—to improve standards in our schools is to focus on leadership, and that is what she should be giving all her attention to. Will she take the £1 billion that she was going to spend
on forcing every school to become an academy and use it to recruit and train a new generation of brilliant headteachers?

Nicky Morgan: May I suggest that the hon. Gentleman read, or re-read if he has already done so, chapter 3 of the White Paper, entitled “Great leaders running our schools and at the heart of our system”? We do not need to divert money because we have already set aside money for training headteachers and supporting their great leadership. If he wants to talk about our rankings in the international league tables, he might like to consider that between 2000 and 2009 England’s 15-year-olds fell from seventh to 25th in reading, eighth to 27th in maths, and fourth to 16th in science. If he thinks that performance when his party was in power was good enough, he should have another think.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State for her statement. There is nothing ignoble about a Secretary of State coming to the House to make changes based on legitimate concerns raised by colleagues, including my local LEA, Conservative-controlled Peterborough City Council. In the new dispensation, will she bear in mind two particular issues: first, the statutory role of the LEA in respect of school place planning and special educational needs; and, secondly, the fact that there still remain capacity issues for academy chains in dealing with the very serious problems of failing schools, some of which are in my constituency?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for making those points. I congratulate him and his local councillors on taking control of Peterborough City Council, which was a fantastic result. He raises two very important issues. Of course we will continue to work with Members and local authorities on place planning, but also on building capacity. In the White Paper, we talk about the money that we have already set aside and the ability to grow strong, multi-academy trust sponsors, including existing good and outstanding schools, which can often be the most effective sponsors.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): If the Secretary of State is serious about the concept of excellence everywhere, she needs to deal with the real challenge caused by the pressure put on schools to take students who are most likely to help with league tables, at the expense of students who are perceived to be less likely to do so. In doing that, she should listen to the principal of Passmores Academy, Vic Goddard, who has made the point that if something is not done about that pressure, a two-tier education system will be created to the detriment of many thousands of children who will, throughout their lives, never recover from the damage that is done to them.

Nicky Morgan: I have met Vic Goddard, and I have had the pleasure of visiting his school and seeing just how committed and dedicated a headteacher he is. My first point, in answer to the hon. Gentleman’s question, is that the admissions code makes it extremely clear that schools cannot screen out or not take on certain pupils. If there is evidence of that, it needs to be reported. My second point is that, as I am sure he knows as a former member of the Select Committee on Education, we are moving towards the progress 8 measure, under which we will move away from looking at children on the C-D borderline and look instead at the progress that all students make over the course of their schooling. Schools such as Vic Goddard’s will be particularly good at making sure that that is done well.

William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): As a former teacher, I welcome my right hon. Friend’s decision to reconsider compulsory academisation. Does she recognise that it is vital to engage with the teaching profession as she seeks to implement the other important measures contained in the White Paper? I encourage her to press ahead with those, despite the low-level disruption that she faces from those in front of her.

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend very much for what he has said. He is, I am sure, an expert at dealing with low-level disruption. On a more serious point, engaging with teachers is something that I take very seriously and enjoy doing. One of the best things that I do is to get out of Westminster to visit schools and take part in the “teacher direct” sessions that I arrange.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Secretary of State has talked about the many conversations that she has had in recent weeks, which have apparently convinced her that blanket powers for forced academisation are no longer necessary. In order to avoid a period of uncertainty and worry for school communities, would it not have been better to have had those conversations before announcing such a flawed policy?

Nicky Morgan: I have lots of conversations all the time, but one thing I was being asked for before the publication of the White Paper was a very clear statement about where we were going and whether we wanted schools to become academies. That is exactly what the White Paper offers.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I, too, thank the Minister for her statement and for listening not only to Back Benchers and Members on both sides of the Chamber, but to teachers. I sense that they have concerns, but that they are willing to work with us. Will she assure me that, throughout the process, she will continue to focus on raising standards and raising aspirations, which are really at the heart of this?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend very much for her comments. She is absolutely right to say that high aspirations and raising standards must be at the heart of our education policy. Education is the greatest investment that we can make in the future of our country, and it has to be about making sure that all our young people fulfil their potential and are set up for the world of work. We will absolutely keep that as the focus of all our reforms.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Although it was welcomed, many parents and teachers in my constituency fear that the Secretary of State’s announcement was merely a tactical retreat, and that the Government are still committed to exactly the same ends by other means. With those concerns in mind, will she provide me with some more details about the point
at which a local authority will be judged to be unviable, and how the minimum performance threshold will be defined?

Nicky Morgan: If the hon. Gentleman was listening to my statement, he will know that I said that we would be consulting on that, and that those measures would be subject to an affirmative resolution in the House. At all stages since the publication of the White Paper, our goal has been to raise standards for all children. That has not changed.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for engaging so constructively on this issue. The statement that she has made today will be most welcome in Somerset. I have recently visited a number of good and outstanding local authority-controlled schools in my constituency, which see the attraction of academisation but are nervous about the transition. Will the Secretary of State set out how her Department will work with schools and local authorities to facilitate that transition at a time of a school’s choosing?

Nicky Morgan: I absolutely understand the worry about the unknown—about what becoming an academy means and how much time it will take—which is why we have set out that small schools will have a specific fund to support them and that each school wanting to convert will get its own adviser. I strongly urge my hon. Friend to speak to his regional schools commissioner, who has an important position in the local community in working with schools that want to convert and can raise any problems directly with me or the Minister for Schools.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Secretary of State is sending out mixed messages. If I heard her correctly, she has just declared that we will still see “academies for all”. Does she accept that this whole episode has caused tremendous stress and anxiety to headteachers and staff up and down the country? Headteachers are now considering converting to academy status not to raise their standards, but simply to avoid being pushed. Will she give them some reassurance that they should focus not on their structures, but on their standards?

Nicky Morgan: We have been very clear—I do not think that I could have been clearer in my answers or in my original statement—that we want all schools to be focused on raising standards. However, I and we are very clear about the benefits of schools becoming academies, and about trusting those on the frontline to run their schools and to be accountable for the results they achieve. That is why we are very clear that we want all schools to become academies, but to do so at a time and in a way of their choosing, unless they are underperforming schools, the local authority is underperforming or it is no longer viable for the local authority to run them because of the numbers of schools that have converted.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I recently met school leaders and Hampshire County Council leaders who were keen to hear about the Secretary of State’s direction of travel. I welcome the listening exercise for me and my colleagues, which has begun the process of truly understanding the commitment and promise in our manifesto to lift the standards in our schools. Today’s statement shows that the focus is on our children and on helping all of them to achieve. In relation to the White Paper listening exercise, will the Secretary of State fill in the gaps on parents’ voices and links to the community?

Nicky Morgan: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work she has done locally in bringing schools together and in talking to parents and others in her constituency. It is incumbent on all of us to continue to do that as constituency Members of Parliament, but also to encourage people to visit schools that have converted, because that is often the best way to understand how the process works and what are the best decisions to take. That applies to parents, governors and teachers, and to headteachers as well.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): The situation is very confusing at the moment: the Government seem happy to give Greater Manchester councils full health devolution, with £8 billion a year, but do not trust them to be given the same control of their schools. Will the Secretary of State explain that difference?

Nicky Morgan: Becoming an academy is all about the ultimate devolution—devolution to the frontline of the heads, the teachers and the governors.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend’s flexibility on this matter. Secondary schools in Gloucestershire were among the first warmly to embrace becoming academies, but that seems to have left a communication gap in relation to small rural schools. How can her Department, and indeed all of us, communicate with the parents, governors and teachers of such small secondary schools about the benefits of academies?

Nicky Morgan: In my statement, I set out some of the specific policies, and we will put together a package of information about them that hon. Members can circulate to relevant schools. I encourage my hon. Friend to do what others have done, which is to call together heads or chairs of governors for meetings, and to involve the regional schools commissioners, who will hold events to talk about becoming an academy and the sponsorship opportunities available if that is what such small schools want to pursue.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am sure that the many good and outstanding schools in my constituency that are not academies will welcome this statement, but I am concerned that the Secretary of State’s dogmatic ambitions remain the same and that she still intends to force every school to academise by hook or by crook. A few weeks ago, she said that “we are going to finish this job.”—[Official Report, 25 April 2016, Vol. 608, c. 1119.]

Does she still stand by that statement, or will she finally recognise the right of good and outstanding local schools to determine their own destiny and accept that if they decide not to become an academy, that right will be respected?
Nicky Morgan: That just shows that if hon. Members sit here and listen to a statement, they still do not necessarily listen to what I have actually been saying. I have talked about finishing the job—the job of lifting standards for all young people in this country.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for her measured and thoughtful statement, which I believe will address the legitimate concerns of many excellent but small rural schools in my constituency. Does she agree that in education, and indeed across all government, we must never let the outstanding become the enemy of the good?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend and neighbour and I both know that we are very fortunate in Leicestershire to have many great schools, but we also know from our experience that not all young people have the opportunity to attend a good or outstanding school, whether in the midlands or elsewhere. That is why we cannot let up on the pursuit of reforms that lift educational standards.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): In one of the most affluent constituencies in the country I could find only six schools that were ranked as outstanding. That is the result of successive cosy relationships with the LEA under different administrations. What is my right hon. Friend going to do to make sure that that situation is improved?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend raises a really important issue. A number of people have told me that they are in good local authorities with good schools, but we should compare those with other local authorities—whether similar local authorities or those in the most disadvantaged areas—where sometimes we see schools doing fantastic things for their pupils. That is why we introduced the Education and Adoption Act 2016, which tackles coasting schools—those schools that are okay, but that could be a lot better. That is what we intend to help them to achieve.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s strength in her statement. In my constituency, and in Medway as a whole, most secondary schools and a large proportion of primaries are already academies. Some of those were compelled to become academies. It is true that home-grown academies have played a massive role in driving up standards within our authority, which has historically been an underperforming one. In my time as portfolio holder for education improvement, I saw adults’ positions being put before outcomes for young people in the schools those adults were charged with looking after. Will the Secretary of State confirm that she is committed to tackling underperformance, wherever it is?

Nicky Morgan: By the sheer strength and passion of my hon. Friend’s question, she has shown just how committed she is to this agenda. I well remember discussing it with her on the campaign trail when she was seeking election to this House. I absolutely assure her that we will have no let up and no reverse gear on lifting standards for all young people in this country.
does, however, raise the issue of the viability of the Torbay LEA, and I was interested to hear the Secretary of State’s comments. Will she confirm whether the thresholds for Government intervention will be based on the percentage of pupil numbers or the percentage of schools, or will that be subject to later consultation?

Nicky Morgan: That is a good question and something that we want to continue discussing when taking measures through the House, including with local authorities. The important thing is a local authority’s ability to have the resources, experience and personnel to offer really good school improvement, and in my experience, most local authorities will be able to judge when they are struggling with that. We know that at least one local authority has already asked us to issue academy orders for its remaining schools.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and willingness to engage on what was, let us remember, a White Paper for discussion. Last Friday afternoon I was in a meeting with the leader and schools leader of Hampshire County Council, and it is fair to say that the first half of the meeting did not go as well as the second half once they had heard her announcement, and I pass on their thanks. My hope is that this compromise will allow us to get on in successful areas—94% of schools in my constituency are already good or outstanding—and allow her to focus ruthlessly on those areas where children do not enjoy the life chances that they do in my constituency. Do I have that right?

Nicky Morgan: The announcement on Friday was not timed exactly for my hon. Friend’s meeting with Hampshire local authority, but he had made clear to me when he was having that meeting. He is right to say that in the White Paper and subsequent discussions it has become clear that children in some parts of the country are getting a great education, but that is not the case everywhere. I cannot say strongly enough how much I feel that we must ensure that such educational excellence is shared by all children in all parts of this country.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. I had my concerns about compulsory academisation, but she has clearly taken the time to listen to all her colleagues and I welcome that approach. I also welcome the £10 million fund for small rural schools that need support in conversion, but when will that be made available? If a number of schools are looking to form a multi-academy trust, will the money go to the lead school or to them all?

Nicky Morgan: We still need to work out the details, but the idea is for the fund to be available sooner rather than later, and some small schools are already thinking about their future. The fund would be for things such as legal costs. I will not set out all the details, but it is important that the funds supports all schools, because they will all need that support, not just the lead school.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I do not share the rose-tinted view of some about local education authorities, and mine in Nottinghamshire has failed consistently to provide good-quality education in Newark. At times, political parties and local education authorities in my town have been extremely complacent and ineffective. To me, the most important thing is the willingness to intervene when schools are demonstrably failing, and that has been neglected for too long. In her advice and guidance for regional schools commissioners, will the Secretary of State redouble the commitment to intervene, so that no child’s education gets written off as has happened to generations in my town of Newark?

Nicky Morgan: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s commitment, as a local Member of Parliament, to driving up educational standards in his constituency. He is absolutely right to say that. We know there are local authorities across the country—he mentions his own—that have never issued a warning notice or appointed an interim executive board to run a school. We could not be clearer with the regional schools commissioners. They are an excellent team who know they need to intervene swiftly when there is educational failure. I have seen that with the re-brokering of sponsorships and with the sending out of financial and educational warning notices. That absolutely will continue.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): As the governor of an excellent academy, Hillview school in Tonbridge, which has done so much to maintain the ethos of arts education, I am very proud of the Government’s work to support academies. I very much welcome the Secretary of State’s comments and ask her whether she timed them for me to be able to write to Ightham Parish Council and thank it for its very useful intervention only last week, or whether it was timed for Four Elms Parish Council, whose intervention was on Friday.

Nicky Morgan: I am delighted to have assisted my hon. Friend and those parish councils, if that is the case. It was important that we made the announcement. I congratulate him on being a governor of the school. On the arts, I visited the fantastic Lings primary school in Northampton—I think I have mentioned it in the House before—which has embedded Shakespeare in the curriculum from reception to year 6. That shows what inspirational headteachers, with the support of an academy trust, can do to transform education in their schools.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for listening on both academies and fair funding. Will she or one of her ministerial colleagues meet me and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) to discuss the situation in South Staffordshire, where schools are working really hard but suffering tremendously in comparison with neighbouring authorities on the question of funding per head?

Nicky Morgan: Yes, of course. The Schools Minister or I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend. We have made a very clear commitment, which was not taken up under 13 years of the previous Labour Government, to transform how fair funding works across the country. It has to be right that the same pupils with the same characteristics attract the same funding. That is what we are determined to see.
Points of Order

5.22 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): On 28 April, the Leader of the House, in answer to the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), attempted to smear the prospective Labour party police and crime commissioner candidate for Humberside, Keith Hunter. The hon. Member for Brigg and Goole asked:

“As we are talking about the dodgy behaviour of police and crime commissioner candidates, may I say to the Leader of the House that a number of folk standing for election next week are ex-coppers trading on their record as police officers? Does he agree that the Government should bring forward proposals to ensure that ex-police officers standing to be PCCs make their police service record available for public scrutiny?”

The Leader of the House replied:

“My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am aware of allegations about the Labour PCC candidate in Humberside. If the stories alleged about that candidate are true, he is unfit for public office, and it is a matter of public interest that the truth should be known before election day.”—[Official Report, 28 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 1564-5.]

I wrote to the Leader of the House requiring him to either explain the deliberately damaging remarks and the precise basis for them, or to formerly withdraw them and apologise for the disgusting attempted smear. Mr Speaker, would you please advise me on what I can do, given that the Leader of the House is ignoring formal correspondence from elected Members, including formal correspondence from Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition, and deliberately misusing this place for divisive and nasty Tory party political campaigning?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his courtesy in giving me advance notice of the thrust of it. The short answer to the hon. Gentleman is that what is said in this place by any Member is the responsibility of that Member. It is not the responsibility of the Chair. Clearly, we should all think carefully before making accusations against individuals. The hon. Gentleman has made his point and doubtless this exchange will be relayed to the Leader of the House. The hon. Gentleman can seek to secure a written reply from the Leader of the House if he so wishes, but I cannot involve myself further. I will leave the hon. Gentleman to his own devices.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you know, there is a tradition of service in the House of Commons either to one’s constituents or to others, such as charities, and indeed, within the House, we serve on Committees. During the war, some Members did fire watching service over Westminster Hall. The reason for my point of order is that we learn today of the danger of war if the UK were to leave the EU. I wondered whether you, your staff or any Officers of the House had made provision for fire service or—I don’t know—missiles of defence, should war imminently break out upon our leaving the EU?

Mr Speaker: I confess that I have made no such preparations. I would not wish to be accused of tardiness or irresponsibility by the hon. Gentleman or any other Member, but I have been preoccupied with other duties in the House today, including in the Chair and listening to the hon. Gentleman’s mellifluous tones. I have embarked thus far on no such preparations, but I have a hunch that he was more interested in what he had to say to me than in anything I might have had to say to him.
When we asked the permanent secretary for a cost-benefit analysis, we got no answer. A cost-benefit analysis of moving a departmental office is not commercially sensitive and, so far as I can see, it is not a matter of national security. Why, then, right from day one, has the Department refused to provide the evidential basis for this proposal? Members have asked for this analysis in a Westminster Hall debate, in oral questions, in an urgent question, in written parliamentary questions, in over three separate evidence sessions of two Select Committees—the BIS Committee and the Public Accounts Committee—and in written correspondence. Yet we are still to see this information.

We can only assume that the reason for that is that the decision does not stand up to scrutiny. Such information as we have managed to wheedle out through written questions and other ways seems to confirm that. The answer to parliamentary question 33917 tells us that each year it costs £3,190 on rent, rates and maintenance to have an employee in the Sheffield office, compared with £9,750 in the London office. The Department rightly offers the London salary weighting of £3,500 a year, so we are already up to more than £10,000 per employee in London in comparison with Sheffield. That is before we even consider recruitment issues in London, where a more competitive jobs market inevitably drives salaries up further, which was acknowledged by the permanent secretary. When questioned on the issue, the permanent secretary told the Public Accounts Committee last month:

“We have not sought to put a price”
on those additional costs. That is extraordinary, and it is not good enough.

Paul Blomfield: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and he will not be surprised to learn that I shall come back to the point a little later in my contribution.

The Government say, quite understandably, that they want to save money, but we have done the maths from the limited information that we have managed to get. This decision will cost the Department in operational costs an additional £2.5 million a year, every year. I shall press the Minister further on the figures. When we tried to get a proper cost-benefit analysis, the permanent secretary told the BIS Select Committee:

“I do not think I can point to you one specific document that covers specifically the Sheffield issue.”

Furthermore, when the Minister for Universities and Science drew the short straw in having to defend the seemingly indefensible at a Westminster Hall debate back in February, he was clearly briefed by civil servants to respond to the repeated requests we made for a cost-benefit analysis, by saying:
I am unable to provide a disaggregated breakdown of that figure because we are talking about a system change.”—[Official Report, 24 February 2016; Vol. 606, c. 138WH.]

That is not so. I have it here in an internal BIS management document on a page entitled, “Potential Savings from Sheffield Office Closure”.

I think that there are some serious issues here relating to the hand that Ministers have been dealt by senior civil servants in their Department. Indeed, when answering an urgent question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) immediately after the announcement, the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise said:

“We are confident that many of the workers will choose to take new jobs down in London.”—[Official Report, 29 March 2016; Vol. 605, c. 562.]

I am afraid that that is not the case, according to the leaked internal document, which states that “90% of the potential savings are dependent on how many jobs are retained and moved to London.”

In other words, the more people reject the non-offer to up sticks, try to find a house in London’s hugely overheated housing market and move their children to different schools, the more money will be saved—and, to make sure of that, no relocation package was offered to the staff.

That takes me back to the obfuscation that we have encountered throughout the months during which we have debated this issue. In response to my most recent attempts to obtain the figures via written parliamentary questions, I was referred to a letter from the permanent secretary and the Chairs of the Business, Innovation and Skills and Public Accounts Committees. It sets out quite exaggerated costs for the Sheffield office, and some incredulity was expressed in the Public Accounts Committee when the issue was discussed there. Unless none of the functions being carried out in Sheffield—relating to the higher education White Paper and higher education in general, to apprenticeships, and to further education funding—is to be replaced in London, the letter provides only one side of the story, because the costs will be incurred in the replacement of the posts of people who do not move in London.

Is this simply a case of cutting 247 posts because they happen to be in Sheffield—posts which, because they are in Sheffield, are by definition, as I have said, £10,000 cheaper? A decision was made without regard for costs, without regard for the policy areas in which the people involved were working, and without regard for the expertise that would be lost. Indeed, the former—and highly regarded—Conservative special adviser in the Department, Nick Hillman, who is now head of the Higher Education Policy Institute, has lamented the loss of institutional expertise that this move will involve, and has condemned the decision for that reason.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Many of my constituents work for the Insolvency Service. At a time when there is a steel crisis, BHS has collapsed and other businesses are becoming insolvent, one would think that the Government would want to retain staff with expertise in insolvency, yet 153 jobs are at risk. Does my hon. Friend agree that that does not seem to be a sensible policy approach?

Paul Blomfield: I do indeed, and I think that other Departments are recognising that problem. For example, the Department for Education is trying to take some of the Sheffield-based BIS staff into its headcount because it is so worried about the loss of institutional expertise in respect of the programmes and the policy agenda that they share. The loss of that institutional experience and expertise is a really worrying issue, and it prompts concern about the Government’s ability to deliver their agenda.

What this begins to look like is a lazy decision, easily taken by top managers in the Department, and based on a prejudice that policy people should be together in Whitehall. I have to say that it is not a prejudice shared by other Departments. Indeed, the Department for Education celebrates the fact that it has members of staff making policy in offices around the country, bringing the experience of their lives and work in the regions and nations of the United Kingdom to those policy decisions.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. As he will know, not only has the Department for Education made it clear that it does not think it is for the good of education policy to move all staff to London, but it shares a building with BIS staff. Alongside is a skills agency, which, when questioned by the Public Accounts Committee, confirmed that it had no problem with having good, bright staff based in Sheffield to do policy work. Is it not worrying that BIS feels that we should move all the policy jobs—many of them good, highly paid and highly qualified jobs—to London? What does that say to young people in south Yorkshire and other areas outside London?

Paul Blomfield: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question, and for her robust questioning of the permanent secretary at the Public Accounts Committee. She is absolutely right to say that this sends out the wrong message. When we raised this matter with the permanent secretary, he pointed out that there were many other BIS jobs around the country. It is almost as though BIS is happy to have administrative functions carried out around the country but policy people have to be together in London. This raises another point about silo thinking within Government. As my right hon. Friend points out, there is a synergy involved in having civil servants in policy roles in BIS and the Department for Education working together on a similar agenda. Taking them away and moving them to London will diminish their role.

Alex Cunningham: I am really interested in this idea of policy people having to be at the centre. The Department argues that the move will bring BIS policy operations closer to Ministers and contribute to the huge saving of £350 million of running costs. However, the “Government’s Estate Strategy” states:

“With modern IT, officials no longer necessarily need to be physically present, for example to brief ministers. Having offices on the periphery will also encourage local growth and regeneration.”

That is the Government’s own strategy. Does my hon. Friend not detect a conflict there?

Paul Blomfield: I do indeed. I would simply reflect that this is the Department responsible for innovation. It is supposed to lead on creative thinking and thinking outside the box.
I worry, as do colleagues, that proper consideration has not been given to better options. The Department set itself an ambitious cost-saving strategy in “BIS 2020”, but what is its thinking on how it is going to get there? Normally, faced with decisions such as these, big organisations would think about the resources they needed to achieve their objectives, look at the matter in the round, model how those resources should be most cost-effectively located around the country, then make the decisions. Decisions about office closures would naturally come at the end of that process, not at the beginning, as has been the case here. The Department is putting the cart before the horse.

Paul Blomfield: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We saw a process of consultation, which concluded on 2 May. The trade unions, working with the affected staff, have put in some substantial submissions and alternative proposals, and I shall be seeking reassurances from the Minister that they will be properly considered and their merits given the weight they deserve.

As a number of Members have commented, the “BIS 2020” review might result in some relocation of staff and in the concentration of policy staff in some areas. However, the idea that all policy functions need to be concentrated in London is simply absurd. It is even more ironic, given the wider Government policy that my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) has just mentioned.

This year’s Budget committed the Government to moving out of “expensive Whitehall accommodation”. The Cabinet Office recently launched a raft of measures in a bid to diversify the civil service, after one of the Bridge report’s key findings was that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were “less likely to move” to London. One such measure that the Cabinet Office is recommending is to take graduate recruitment “outside of London by establishing regional assessment centres”. The most recent “Government’s Estate Strategy” expresses a commitment to “turn around the prevailing tendency to locate head office staff in central London”. That is Government policy.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree with me, a London MP, that centralisation and the relocating of staff presents a problem for London? It leads to congestion, more overheating, incredibly expensive accommodation, and so on. Most graduates cannot afford to rent in London, let alone buy their own property.

Paul Blomfield: My hon. Friend makes an important point. No one wants this to be seen as a north versus south issue. The proposal flies in the face of logic for both north and south. It makes no sense to add to the overheating in London, so we share a common agenda on that.

Colleagues commented earlier on the northern powerhouse agenda, which Sheffield and south Yorkshire have been deeply involved in and embrace. It is about encouraging the private sector to invest in the north, to build there, to relocate there, and to revive its economy, but if the very Department responsible for building the northern powerhouse wants out of the north, withdrawing 247 highly skilled jobs from the local economy with it, what message does that send?

Today’s debate came about because our key questions were not answered by the permanent secretary. Now is the Minister’s opportunity, so I want to conclude by asking four questions, to which Members and the hard-working staff of the BIS office in Sheffield have been seeking answers since January. I gave the Department advance sight of the questions last Wednesday to allow for full consideration and comprehensive answers. First, in reaching the decision to close the Sheffield office, what assessment has been made of the additional costs of moving the posts to London? That is the core question that we have been asking all along. Secondly, what assessment of the decision has been made against the Government objectives of moving out of expensive Whitehall accommodation, diversifying the civil service, and not locating head office functions in the capital? Thirdly, what assessment has been made of the impression created by the decision to move to London the functions of an office of the Department responsible for the northern powerhouse? Fourthly, aside from the proposals to centralise policy functions in London, what consideration has been given to the other options for achieving the “BIS 2020” objectives?

I understand that the decision, which was at one stage to have been taken by the BIS board tomorrow, has now been postponed and will be announced in the week commencing 23 May. I hope that that reflects a willingness to think seriously about the concerns that have been raised. I hope the Minister recognises that if the proposal goes ahead, the National Audit Office scrutiny we propose in today’s motion will find it flawed. I hope that she will therefore accept that it is the right time and in the interests of good policy making, effective use of public funds and confidence in the case for the north to exert ministerial authority and pull the plug on the closure of the Sheffield office.

5.48 pm

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). He made a coherent speech, and I congratulate him on leading the charge on this whole issue.

Unlike the hon. Gentleman, I do not have a direct constituency interest in the matter. My interest came about because I was involved in the Public Accounts Committee’s questioning of the permanent secretary, and it struck me that the logic and reasons given for the decision were, unlike the speech we just heard, less than coherent and that they raised several potential issues about contradictory Government policy.

I am not against “BIS 2020” at all, but I do not think that we need this Sheffield closure to bring about its benefits. There are, however, potential contradictions between how “BIS 2020” is being rolled out and talked about, and the devolution, northern powerhouse and Government estate strategies. The latter came out most recently, in 2014, as a piece of analysis further to the
Lyons strategy and all the rest of it, with the general intention, apparently, of trying to get civil service jobs out of London. Since 2010, we have, unfortunately, found that the civil service has become more concentrated in London than it was previously.

I am addressing my remarks not only to you and the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, but to the BIS board, who have yet to make this decision, to Mr Donnelly, who has a chance to row back from some aspects of this, and to Mr Manzoni and Mr Heywood, both of whom have responsibility for consistency of the design principles of some of these initiatives across the civil service. As we have heard, some elements of what is happening in “BIS 2020” do not make sense vis-à-vis what is happening in the Department for Education, the Ministry of Justice and other Departments. If that is not an issue for Mr Manzoni and Mr Heywood, I am not sure what their jobs are.

On “BIS 2020”, I support the need to rationalise: Ministers have been given a target on saving money and if money can be saved, we should do it, if that does not affect efficiency and effectiveness. I have heard that there are 80 BIS sites across the country and that number is to be rationalised to eight, and I have no difficulty with the principle of that. We will come on to understand whether that figure of eight should be nine or seven, and the logic behind how that decision has been made. There are 45 partnership bodies in BIS, and there is clearly a need to change. As we heard in the previous speech, the permanent secretary often says that BIS is quite a distributed Department, and I accept that. I am sure the Minister will have statistics that allow her to discuss how much of BIS is outside London currently, but that is not a logical reason to bring more of it into London in response.

The permanent secretary used a phrase when he was talking about this, saying that a “hub and spoke” strategy is being implemented in “BIS 2020”. The principle of that strategy is that all policy has to be in one place—the hub—with all the other bits being the spokes. Apparently, we have one hub, in London, where the Ministers are—perhaps that is fair enough—and these seven or eight spokes, which is what the focus is going to be on. When I first heard that, I thought, “Okay, we are going to have all the policy in one place. There could be some logic in that. Does that mean 10 people doing policy and they all have to be in London, working together? That might be reasonable. Even 20 or 50 might be reasonable.” Apparently, the number of people who need to be in one place to do policy is 1,600, and that is not a rational approach, although the question is raised as to what is meant by “policy” and by “strategy”. This is based on the advice that McKinsey has given the Department, apparently based on a relatively small amount of input. I know that you don’t get an awful lot of days out of McKinsey for £200,000, and I accept that this is a BIS strategy and not a McKinsey strategy, and that the accountability for it lies with BIS, although the phrase “hub and spoke” does come from McKinsey. We will come back to that issue and to policy.

We have talked about the northern powerhouse and the need for devolution. There is a need in our country to bring back the value added per capita—per person—per region. In the UK, the northern powerhouse is about more than public sector investment and civil service jobs; it is also about private sector investment. When the time comes to say whether the northern powerhouse has worked, the judge and jury will be whether or not the gap in GVA per head has closed—we will see. Let me make a point in defence of Mr Donnelly: he might well accept the analysis that we just heard from the hon. Member for Sheffield Central about cost, but his point would be that he gets more efficiency from having all these policy makers in one place. If he were here, he would make that point—indeed, that is what he did say to the Public Accounts Committee—but it is not a view shared by other permanent secretaries. The argument runs away when he is talking about 1,600 policy makers being in that one place as opposed to 100 of them—it does not bear thinking about.

We have talked about the estate strategy, which was published quite recently, in 2014. It contained a lot of sexy examples of how the Government are saving money through Departments rationalising and moving things out of the capital. It talks about the Ministry of Justice as a case study and about what is happening at the Ministry of Defence; one startling statistic was that the accommodation costs for somebody in Whitehall were £35,000 per annum whereas if we were talking about Croydon, which is still a relatively busy place, the cost would have been £3,000 per annum—goodness knows what the figure would be for Sheffield. Clearly, what we are talking about today is contradictory to that space strategy, which is another reason why Messrs Heywood, Manzoni and Donnelly need to get their act together on this.
I want to discuss three things in a little more detail. The first is the hub and spoke strategy and the need to have all 1,600 people in one place. Mr. Donnelly has said, “Well, that is what Vodafone do.” He said that to the Public Accounts Committee. He has said, “That is what Google do.” I am surprised if that is the case. I accept what he says, but I can give other examples of organisations that do not take that approach—Accenture, Shell and many others. Many of these companies would take the view that having people who are doing strategy in different geographic locations helps formulate that strategy, particularly if it is being applied across those locations. I do not feel that the argument being put forward is coherent. But if that is the policy of the civil service, why does it apply only to BIS? Why does strategy in the Department for Education not all have to be in one place, whereas in BIS it apparently does? Why does strategy in the Ministry of Justice not have to be in one place, whereas it does in BIS? At the very least it would be reasonable if the people charged with running the civil service would address that question and tell us the answer, because I have some difficulty in seeing it.

In addition, a design principle is involved there, because lots and lots of civil service rationalisation is coming up in the next decade. If a considered position of the civil service is that all policy is done in one place, let us make sure that everybody knows that when they are doing this. If that is the position, the Department for Education is doing it wrong and the Ministry of Justice is doing it wrong, and I think Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs may be doing it wrong, too.

We have heard a great dealing about the costing of this proposal. Let us remember that “BIS 2020” has not been published and is not in the public domain. I am not going to charge, as McKinsey did, a couple of hundred thousand pounds for what I am about to say, but I am going to say that although the hub and spoke strategy may well be worth thinking about, there is a Mowat variation to it—it is the double hub and spoke strategy. It could be a model, in the same way as all these consultants have models. Given that we have a starting point with all these people in another hub, it does seem rather odd that, in the context of reducing the size of everything anyway, we have to impose this single hub strategy on the whole thing. Therefore, if the BIS board do get a chance to go through Hansard, I would like it to think about the double hub and spoke strategy and reflect on the fact that, almost certainly given the analysis that we have just heard from the hon. Member for Sheffield Central, it will save money as well as being equally effective.

Finally, there is a policy point about the civil service and the role of London. We have mentioned the fact that it is the major location of civil servants, especially the more senior ones. It is not an entire coincidence that it is the major location of civil servants, especially the more senior ones. It is not an entire coincidence that the consequence of that is that current public spending in London is significantly higher per capita than any other region of the UK. This sort of decision will exacerbate that issue. As I said in the Public Accounts Committee, it just does not smell right.

I say to the BIS board that, before it signs off this proposal, it should ensure that it has asked some of the same questions that have been asked today and that will be asked later on this afternoon. Similarly, I say to Mr. Manzoni and Mr. Heywood that there are points of coherence in BIS vis-à-vis other Departments here and that they need to satisfy themselves that they are happy that rational decisions are being made across the wider civil service. Mr. Donnelly, who is the owner of all of this in terms of the civil service, needs to reflect on whether the hub and spoke system is worth dying in a ditch for, or whether a double hub and spoke strategy, which would save money, would be a much more sensible system. If, in order to achieve design purity, we have to go through a NAO audit of costs and sensibleness, then so be it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I hope that we will not need a formal time limit, but this is a short debate and if Members who wish to speak keep their remarks to under 10 minutes, everyone will have a chance to make their views known.

6.2 pm

Mr Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): I, too, am very grateful to the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for securing this debate, and I strongly support him—albeit from a different constituency in Sheffield and across party lines—in his and our shared endeavour to have the National Audit Office look at a decision that remains wholly unjustified and entirely opaque in the way it has been reached.

I am grateful to the Minister for being here. To be fair to her, she will not be in a position to undo the origins of this eccentric and unjustified decision. In the time since that decision was originally announced, what happened has become more obvious. In the Whitehall scrum that takes place, in which the Treasury cracks the whip and demands lots of savings and obliging Departments are told to jump ever higher and to cut ever deeper—I discovered that for myself over the five years I was in government—BIS took the political decision, the wrong decision in my view, to offer up far, far greater cuts than was either justified or necessary compared with other Whitehall Departments. That decision affected not only many of my constituents who work in the BIS office in Sheffield, but many other BIS projects that have been cancelled in this cull.

Once that high-level decision was taken that BIS should offer up far greater sacrifices in the Whitehall race to make savings for the Treasury, the Department then lurched, as the hon. Gentleman has said, into a panicky and lazy response to create the impression that a number of savings had been made. That duly had the political effect of creating noise, anguish and controversy, but, as we are discovering, the Department did not produce any material savings whatsoever. It is important that we understand the genesis of all of this as we seek now to ask the NAO to cast an expert light on the decision.

What is the evidence for that analysis of what has gone on? First, it is worth comparing the savings that BIS has offered up to the Treasury in this Parliament with those that it offered up in the last one. In the last Parliament, over that five-year period, the BIS savings amounted to about 18%—I remember well that they were an agonising 18%—of the total departmental budget, which meant that BIS was roughly in the middle of the
table of Departments offering up savings to the Treasury. What is striking is that that 18% has gone up to 26% in this Parliament, which means that BIS now leaps from mid-table for savings offered up to the Treasury to enduring the second largest cut of well over £4 billion. That was a choice taken by BIS and accepted by the Treasury. It was an extremely unwise choice given BIS’s important role in trying to foster dynamism and investment in our private sector to support our challenged manufacturing sector, and to reform and support further education and higher education, which are so important to the long-term prosperity of our nation. It was that decision that led to this rather desperate attempt to try to gather together lots of savings in a hurry to meet that headline and somewhat draconian cut of 26%, which in turn led to the announced closure of the Sheffield office.

The hon. Member for Sheffield Central quite rightly referred to the opacity of the Government’s pronouncement on exactly how much this closure will save. In response to a parliamentary question on 14 April 2016, the Department estimated that the current annual cost of the Sheffield office is as follows: £500,000 on travel; £890,000 on rent; and £150,000 on hotel stays. It said: “These savings would be independent of any decision on headcount reductions, on which we are still consulting.”

The only concrete saving figure that I have been able to get is £1.54 million—a risible, almost microscopically invisible, amount when it is set against total Government expenditure. It is about 0.005% of BIS’s annual expenditure and, by my rough calculations, it is 0.0002% of total Government spending. It is a tiny amount given the loss of expertise, the disruption that will be incurred and the other relocation costs that have not been factored into those figures.

When I was walking through Portcullis House, I asked, by way of comparison, how much the fig trees cost. I was told that renting 12 fig trees costs £32,500. By my reckoning, what BIS is saving is the equivalent of renting just over 550 fig trees. That is such a piffling saving compared with the cost to BIS’s expertise in a very, very important area of policy.

The decision also flies very directly in the face of stated Government policy, and very recently stated policy. As the Bridge report of 2 February 2016 has confirmed, the London-based nature of the civil service fast stream, emphasised by much of the fast stream literature featuring London landmarks, is a deterrent for many students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The Budget document of 2016 stated that the Government are working on an “ambitious strategy to move civil servants out of expensive Whitehall accommodation and into the suburbs of London, delivering substantial savings for the taxpayer”.

This decision therefore has at its origin an excessive zeal on the part of BIS to satisfy Treasury demands in this somewhat self-harming manner at the time of the comprehensive spending round of last year. All the evidence that has been presented to the House so far suggests that the savings, if there are any savings, are of an almost invisible nature and that the decision is damaging not only to my constituents, but to the knowhow and expertise and collective memory of BIS. The decision flies in the face of the Government’s spending. It is a tiny amount given the loss of expertise, the disruption that will be incurred and the other relocation costs that have not been factored into those figures. When we bear all of that in mind, the least that this House can do—and the least that the Minister who is busy chatting from a sedentary position can do—is seriously reflect on what is an uncontroversial request that the NAO cast an objective and dispassionate eye on this decision.

6.10 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg); some might say it makes a change for a Conservative to follow him, rather than the other way round.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this debate on a worthwhile subject. Obviously, my focus will be more on the principle of moving Government Departments out of London, but it is welcome that a matter that affects his constituency has brought this debate to the Floor of the House. Although she has disappeared, it was welcome to see the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) in the Chamber at the start of the debate: the former Member for that constituency would almost certainly have been here, had he been able to.

We are looking at why it is right to move Government Departments out of London—and the wider south-east; if we are candid, some of the issues and difficulties to do with locating in London that were outlined so well by the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) apply to many locations close to London. I look particularly at the success of the Met Office’s relocation to the constituency of the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw). It managed not only to relocate itself and its work successfully, but to help provide a boost to businesses all around by taking its very high-skilled, intensive activity to Exeter. It provides in the far south-west the types of jobs and opportunities that we too often say are available only in the large metropolitan areas, or around London.

As we look increasingly at opportunities to take Departments out of London, I hope that places such as Torbay will be considered. The plan for a public service hub in Torquay that the Torbay Development Agency has been promoting for the last couple of years is an opportunity to regenerate a site around the Riviera International Centre; staff at that centre would have the opportunity to live in one of the best places in the country, with some of the best schools. There would also be a huge cost saving to the Government if it located jobs there and not in central London. It is worth remembering that when we free up office space in central London, it does not mean that jobs are lost there: in many cases, within a short period, those buildings in London have more people working in them, at a higher salary, because of the huge pressure for development and office space in London.

I do not intend to get into the details of the issue in Sheffield, given that speakers who are much more knowledgeable on this subject have already spoken on it, but I have always had the concern that too often we review the issue of departmental offices in London or the south-east only when a lease is expiring, a building needs to be sold, or the Treasury is putting the pressure on. It is in some ways welcome that BIS has been slightly more proactive in reviewing its office estate. It is important to remember that a consultation on the proposals is ongoing. I am sure that the Minister will take on board all the comments that have been made. It is important that we do not have reviews only when a
lease and there is an absolute need to think about what should be moving out; we should do that proactively.

Speaking as an MP from the south-west, I think that locating people outside London gives them more of a feel for the regional policies being delivered, be that in the north-west, the north-east, the midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber, or the far south-west. It is right to continue that drive. Some functions will always remain in London, mostly those directly related to supporting the Government. The same can be said of debates about the future of this place, given the need for major refurbishment. I do not think that anyone will seriously suggest that the core functions of Government, and Parliament, which holds Government to account, could be moved away from the capital, but there are more opportunities that could be explored, such as the one that I highlighted in my constituency.

Crucially, we can use skilled jobs to help generate the sort of training courses, and stimulate people’s aspirations and opportunities, without them having to incur the cost of moving to the capital. I grew up in a family who were rich in love, but not in money, and one of the first things that I encountered when starting to think about a career in the legal service was the fact that my only relative who lived within commuting distance of central London had passed away about six years earlier. That meant that the option of staying in the spare room had disappeared, and with it the likelihood of sensibly being able to take up opportunities in London. Owing to the costs, I ended up spending a year commuting from Coventry to London. With a young person’s railcard, it worked out cheaper to commute over 100 miles daily than to live in the vicinity of where I was taking the Bar vocational course.

That challenge applies to many. I am sure that many other right hon. and hon. Members in the Chamber will think of special training courses or experiences that are available only in the capital, and that it is difficult for people to take up unless they have a granny, aunt or uncle with whom they can stay. That is a separate challenge that the Government could look at in the context of this debate.

The permanent secretary said:

"I've worked in the civil service 10 years in London and the rest..."

Unfortunately, that means that we have to reduce the number of people who are working for us.”

The question of whether cutting jobs is necessarily wise is a debate in itself. It might be a few years before we know whether the decision was wise. The Minister went on to say:

“...we make sure that we use the money to best effect, which is why we considered the decision so very carefully, as I hope that she understands we would.”—[Official Report, 29 January 2016; Vol. 605, c. 562.]

Most of us would like to know whether the Government took the right decision. The sad fact is that, on this subject, there are many things that we just do not know. The so-called McKinsey report that the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat) mentioned, costing some £200,000, has not yet been published, yet we are all this way down the road towards a decision that we think will be taken. Why can we not have that report, so that we can see whether the decision stands up to proper scrutiny?

Indeed, do we actually have a report? When the permanent secretary gave evidence to the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central said, at question 72,

“...if there was more than one paper, we could probably look at them all, so if you could share those with us it would be helpful. Can you also share the McKinsey report with us?”

The permanent secretary replied:

“The McKinsey report was about a set of actions to validate internal calculations, both quantitative and in terms of the strategic vision.”

He contradicted himself two questions later; in question 74, my hon. Friend said:

“So you will share those papers with us.”

The permanent secretary said:

“There is not such a thing as a McKinsey report, but there is McKinsey input into a set of different aspects of the work that we were doing. I will see what further information we can usefully share, because the process is one where we have come to a very clear business conclusion in terms of a sustainable model for the Department delivering”.

That is as clear as mud. The proposal, which will affect my constituents and those of many other Members, is beyond the pale.

We have to look at the proposal against the backdrop of a recent Financial Times report that 20% of civil service jobs had been lost in the regions since 2010, as opposed to only 9% in London. That is an extraordinary figure which seems to go against the main thread that we have had—or should have had—in Government thinking, not for the past five or six years, but for decades. I well remember when the Labour Government built the advanced manufacturing park near Sheffield—it is actually in Rotherham, but it is often said to be in Sheffield—and it is a glowing example of what Governments can do if they have the will. It is a centre of excellence now. Minister go there every other week, smiling for the cameras and saying how wonderful it is.

On the Sheffield BIS closure, I was contacted by a person now in their third decade in the civil service, who said:

“I’ve worked in the civil service 10 years in London and the rest in Sheffield. For the majority of that time, I have worked in teams that have been split between Sheffield and London. To my knowledge, there has never been any issues regarding the quality of work or negative impact on policy decisions/policy work due to operating split site teams.

Aside from the obvious impact on me personally with respect to having to find another job, I am concerned about the effect this
decision will have on the City of Sheffield and surrounding areas. I am still trying to understand why the Department for Business would take such a step.”

Not only will the closure be devastating for south Yorkshire, but it will lead to a huge loss of expertise for the Department—for example, the person I have just quoted, who has been in their job for decades. It is difficult to imagine that such people could uproot themselves and come down to work in London, even if they could afford to buy a property in London. The absence of any relocation programme speaks volumes about the intention behind the closure, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central pointed out. The intention is to get rid of those staff and not to relocate them to London. Surely a package would be presented if the Government’s intention were to relocate them.

My hon. Friend spoke about Nick Hillman who, as we know, was a special adviser to David Willetts during his time as Universities and Science Minister. Nick Hillman has described the closure as “a genuine tragedy for good public policymaking”. He says that the Sheffield civil servants “hold BIS’ institutional memory on HE and often know more than the policymakers who are nominally closer to the centre of power”.

The staff in Sheffield work closely with external organisations, such as employers and education providers, visiting them to explain policies on funding, deregulation, further and higher education, and Government strategy on rail, as well as listening to their issues so as better to inform policy. A purely London-based staff will mean additional costs, particularly as a result of pay differentials, and a less prompt service for organisations based in the midlands and the north. Gone will be the knowledge and understanding of localities, sectors and industries that can make a difference to effective policy making and allocation of funding.

Sheffield staff are responsible for applying ministerial policies and strategies on the ground. BIS sites such as the one in Sheffield ought to be in the vanguard, helping the Government to rebalance the economy and supporting rebalancing in the sectors based in the regions. It seems particularly strange that BIS, with its supposed ambition to create more geographically balanced growth, should take this decision, when other Departments, such as the Department for Education, plan to remain in Sheffield. It is nonsense and the concept of a northern powerhouse is weakened by such decisions, which undermine what this Government and previous Governments have said for years—that Government Departments should be relocating out of London.

The people who deserve to see the information that is largely absent from this debate are the 247 people who have a cloud hanging over their heads. As I stated previously, the Government must publish all the facts. I support the motion calling for the National Audit Office to conduct a cost-benefit assessment of the BIS Sheffield proposal, so that we can properly review the decision. I hope that when the Minister replies, she will respond to that call and to the four questions posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central.

6.25 pm

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): I am conscious of the time so I will try not to regurgitate too many of the points that have already been made. I welcome the debate and the manner in which the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) opened it.

In my constituency I have officers of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, Companies House and the Department for Work and Pensions, to name but a few, so I am mindful of the “BIS 2020” programme. I wholeheartedly support the Public Accounts Committee and the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee in their requests to the permanent secretary, and I hope those reports are forthcoming, as I look forward to an evidence-led debate. I look forward also to the Minister’s response today.

From talking to some of the most energetic, determined public servants in Cardiff, I know about the project. Twenty jobs in the Companies House policy and analytical unit will be moved to London. Staff feel insulted by the lack of consultation and they are conscious of the cloud over their heads, which the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) referred to. The lack of engagement with the staff at Companies House is extremely worrying to me. Given that the BIS board is looking more broadly at the position, I hope a conclusion will be reached soon and that it can be seen in the context of the reports that we have asked for.

I would like to emphasise what I have been told by constituents who work at Companies House. The staff affected have never been on poor performance measures and it has never been suggested to them that being based in Cardiff has affected the policy advice that they gave to civil servants and Ministers. The rationale for the decision has never been explained to them. They have been left bemused and seeking answers. I hope that this debate and my contribution will help to elicit some clarity that I can share with my constituents.

I welcome the double hub and spiral strategy that my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat) came up with on the hoof, provided the second hub is Cardiff. I am sure hon. Members from across the United Kingdom have different ideas. The Government’s estates strategy is welcome in Cardiff because the new Government hub will reinvest in parts of the city. When HMRC moves in with other Departments—we do not quite know where in Cardiff, but we have that commitment to Cardiff—we will see more civil service jobs coming to our great city.

The Government hub is welcome, but the BIS announcement is a cloud overshadowing the excitement in the public sector in Cardiff. People are seeing the estates strategy delivering for them, pulling more jobs to Cardiff, but the staff affected feel insulted by a decision whose rationale they do not understand, especially given their role in advising on policy.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Newport Public and Commercial Services Union members asked me to be present at the debate today to show their support for those who work in the BIS office, whom the hon. Gentleman mentions. Newport has benefited hugely over the years from the relocation of civil service jobs from the Office for National Statistics and the Intellectual Property Office, which will also come within the scope of “BIS 2020”. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that although this debate is about Sheffield and he is speaking about Cardiff, it is well worth reiterating to the Minister
just how valued those jobs are across our country, including in Newport, and how important it is that we protect that principle?

Craig Williams: I agree entirely, and I hope that that came out of my contribution. Like me, the hon. Lady will welcome the fact that the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General came down to south Wales to announce that the ONS was safe in Newport. South Wales has a great cluster of UK Government Departments, and their offices make an incredible contribution to the Government in terms of policy analysis and other instruments.

That is why I wanted my contribution to strike a note of caution, and I hope we get some clarity on the issues that have been raised. I again commend the hon. Member for Sheffield Central on securing the debate and on leading it in the manner that he did.

6.30 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I, too, thank the Backbench Business Committee, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) and the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), who have worked hard to secure the debate and the cross-party support it has gained. I hope the Minister is starting to understand that we are not going to go away on this issue.

This decision has been extraordinary: in one fell swoop, BIS Ministers have delivered a thumbs down to the northern powerhouse, a thumbs down to the taxpayer and a thumbs down to their ministerial colleagues who wax lyrical about the benefits of having key staff outside Whitehall.

Crucial board meetings are scheduled for this month, following the end of the consultation. I urge the Minister to go into them with an open mind and to relay the points that have been made here today. First and foremost, I hope she understands that, for people in our city, a decision to close the Sheffield office would be highly symbolic; it would be a signal of the London-centric contempt for the north and for the skill and perspective of northerners—a contempt that has prevailed for far too long. The “BIS 2020” plan appears to reinforce that contempt for a regional perspective, with the London headquarters strengthened while regional posts carrying out vital work are threatened.

We would have expected the Department to support such a significant decision—to move all policy-making expertise from a northern centre into a London HQ—with some reasoning. When I was granted my urgent question, the debate on which has been widely quoted today, the Minister assured me that the decision was part of a cost-saving programme, but officials and Ministers have told us time and time again that a cost-benefit analysis for this decision does not exist.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central and others have said, the admitted cost is far, far higher in London than it would be in Sheffield, Bristol, Cardiff, Darlington or Salford. As the Minister well knows, taxpayers will continue to foot the bill for the office space in Sheffield anyway, as the entire building is leased by the DFE. Furthermore, BIS is one of the few Departments in Whitehall without enough space to accommodate staff adequately, so further centralisation will mean that a rent review is almost certain to hike up the rent yet again.

And for what purpose? So far, the only possible reason we have been able to ascertain is the benefit of London water-cooler conversations. Well, those conversations at BIS must be very good indeed. However, there has been no individual analysis of exactly why they outweigh the unique perspective and institutional memory of staff in Sheffield. Instead, we have seen more tired old thinking from senior Whitehall officials, who, when asked what they wanted the Department to look like in 2020, came back with the same old Whitehall answer: all employees should be within eyesight and earshot of the permanent secretary and the Minister. It is astonishing that, in place of evidence, we seem to have a seriously consequential decision that is costing taxpayers money and reversing Government policy but that is based on lazy assumptions and flimsy justifications.

In the months since the decision was announced, there has been no sense from Ministers or departmental officials that they recognise the exceptionalism of the Sheffield BIS office. Research excellence in the Sheffield region is second to none, with two fantastic universities at the cutting edge of innovation. That work is supported fantastically by BIS’s multibillion pound budget, which is directed from Sheffield. Just a few months ago, researchers from Sheffield University helped to confirm Einstein’s theory of relativity, which will unlock the secrets of the universe—not a bad record.

Sheffield is also the only office outside Whitehall carrying out high-level policy functions. A Government report from 2010 tells us why that matters. It said: “power and career opportunities will only truly move out of London when significant parts of the core policy departments are moved.”

That is exactly what we already have in Sheffield and what we put at risk with this decision.

The Sheffield office could become the eyes and ears of the northern resurgence. Instead, we will have a centralised BIS, alongside a Department for Communities and Local Government with a northern powerhouse Minister whose entire staff is based in London, and a Treasury producing its template devolution deals exclusively from London, with no understanding of the geographical and socioeconomic challenges.

That gets to the heart of the reasons why moving civil servants out of London is a decades-old mantra: cost and perspective. The Smith report, which I just mentioned, wanted to move civil servants out of London to “bring government closer to the people” and “stimulate economic vibrancy”. The report was hardly groundbreaking; in fact, it was based on decades of movement away from Whitehall—something the Minister’s colleagues are encouraging as part of the March Budget. The Ministry of Justice has announced a large-scale move away from London, and the DFE is waxing lyrical about its regional base and is looking to expand it further. That is because doing that is cheaper, and having powerful civil servants in other regions can only be a good thing.

In trying to justify this decision, the Minister will no doubt be adamant that the plan will continue the existing arrangement, with more of her civil servants outside London than in it. Even ignoring the importance of
policy-making clout, the leaked report that has been referenced today has revealed that even that argument does not hold water: all the jobs under threat are distinctly regional, including those in places such as Lancaster, Cardiff and Bristol, to name just a few.

The Skills Funding Agency, with its vast majority of regional staff, who are working hard to deliver the Government’s apprenticeship target, is set to be slashed. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills, which has been doing vital work in getting to the bottom of the slow-burning productivity crisis, is set to go entirely. Rotherham, a town where public sector jobs act as ballast, will be left counting the cost. The entire “BIS 2020” plan looks like a perverse counter to the northern and regional powerhouse agenda: slash jobs in the regions, take no account of the importance of local economies and centralise the Department’s work in London.

If hon. Members think I am leaping to conclusions about the way in which BIS HQ in Whitehall instinctively adopts a London-centric approach that is totally at odds with the devolution of power to a northern powerhouse, they can look at the details of a seminar given to BIS employees early last year by McKinsey and Company—the same company that authored the report into this restructuring. An item on the agenda, which I and other hon. Members have seen, read “how can London ensure it outstrips rival cities”.

This is the same city whose infrastructure spending is more than every other UK city’s combined, at £45 billion.

BIS’s mission statement says the Department will achieve its objectives by having the “right people, in the right place, at the right time”.

How on earth does this strategy achieve that stated aim? The Minister and senior officials may not appreciate it, but there is a reason why an idea that few of their colleagues sign up to, that damages the northern powerhouse and that costs the taxpayer money, is not such a good idea.

I urge the Minister to use the end of the consultation to think again. She should think about what message these proposals send and what damage they do, and she should put a halt to this decision, which will reverse a decades-long progressive trend of moving civil servants out of London.

6.37 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) not only on leading the charge in the debate, but on his quite excellent forensic analysis of why this is a deeply flawed policy decision.

The dispersal of Government offices has been argued for for many years—from as far back as the early 1960s. Although this is not a new debate, therefore, it may be wise to rehearse some of the reasons why dispersal can be forcefully argued for. I would like to focus in my short speech on just three.

First, on cost, it will be considerably more cost-effective to locate Departments in Sheffield or Kirkcaldy than in overheated London. A number of hon. Members have pointed to the fact that they cannot find, or cannot get released, any detailed cost-benefit analysis. Perhaps that is not surprising if no proper cost-benefit analysis has been undertaken in the first place.

Secondly, this is about not just the cost of dispersal but the benefits to the recipient regions. In particular, if dispersal happens in areas that have relatively weak economies compared with London, the benefit of even a few hundred well-paid and secure jobs can be considerable. Many towns in the north of England would benefit greatly if there was more dispersal out of London.

The third point I want to raise, which is much less talked about generally, although a number of hon. Members have raised it today, is the benefit to Government intelligence and decision making. It is unhealthy for all key decision makers and advisers to be based in one location, particularly if that location is out of character with the rest of the country. Dispersal provides an opportunity for better engagement. When we presented the case for this debate at the Backbench Business Committee, I argued that one of the problems is that this decision seems to reek of group-think by the Government. To put it in a slightly more academic fashion, it reminded me of reading for the first time the work of Kenneth Hammond on his cognitive continuum theory, with which I know everybody is deeply familiar. He argued that decision making can be on a continuum from highly intuitive, at one extreme, to highly analytic, at the other extreme, with a mix in between. It strikes me that the reason why a lot of evidence cannot be provided for this decision is that it reeks more of intuition than of detailed analysis of the true benefit.

In the Backbench Business Committee, I was asked why a Scottish MP would want to speak in this debate. Perhaps, without wishing to be accused of any arrogance, there might be one or two examples that could be brought from Scotland to show the benefit of dispersal.


Roger Mullin: Well, I will give the right hon. Lady 15. I was going to make it three, but because of her intervention I know she would like many more. The first, of many, is that of the five major buildings that house all the policy civil servants in Scotland, two are based well beyond Edinburgh. To give an example close to the functions of BIS, locating lifelong learning well outside Edinburgh in a place closer to the majority of higher education and further education institutions has given great benefit. When I talked to the principal of a college in Scotland who had originally been a principal in England, he commented that he found it somewhat easier to get access to senior civil servants in Scotland than south of the border.

Since the Minister kindly invited me to provide more examples, let me talk of Scotland’s 34 executive non-departmental public bodies, the majority of which—some 19—are based outwith the capital, Edinburgh. This includes headquarters in such centres as Inverness, Granton-on-Spey, Dundee, Stirling, Balloch, Hamilton, Newbridge and Paisley, in addition to Edinburgh—[Interruption]—and Glasgow, of course. Some of these play a very significant role in supporting local economies, in addition to being cost-effective locations.

I can go even further, to satisfy the Minister, on to those whom one might want to influence in terms of policy-making advice—the cabinet, for example. Way back in 2008, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) instituted a then fairly modest
initiative to take cabinet meetings, during the summer recess, to one or two different locations away from Edinburgh. This has developed over the years until, now, in mid-2016, 42 cabinet meetings have been held outwith Edinburgh. In the past year alone, cabinet meetings have been held in Dumfries, Aberdeen, Alloa, Inverness, Cupar, Ullapool, Oban, Coatbridge, Greenock, and West Dunbartonshire. Those meetings help with engagement because when they are over, public meetings are held so that the public can come along and question cabinet members. The benefit of that is that thousands of ordinary members of the public have been able to come along and influence decision making.

We should be debating not so much why 247 jobs are being moved from Sheffield to London, but why tens of thousands more jobs are not being located out of London into the regions and nations of the UK.

6.44 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I, too, begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this debate and on his introductory comments. Unfortunately, I only heard the second half of those comments because I was chairing a Select Committee at the time. I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to him for my lateness in arriving at the debate.

I want to concentrate on devolution. The Communities and Local Government Committee recently produced a report in which, on a cross-party basis, we welcomed the Government’s commitment and general approach to devolution. We might have had certain reservations on detail or on the pace at which devolution is going, but nevertheless recognised that it is a key aspect of Government policy that we welcome. We said that devolution is a matter not just for the Department for Communities and Local Government but for all Government Departments, and we want to see all Departments signed up to the policy and contributing to it. It is welcome that economic development and skills are an integral part of the devolution deals in cities such as Manchester and my own city of Sheffield. Key responsibilities of BIS are part of these devolution deals.

We then move on to the use of the term “northern powerhouse” to cover the totality of devolution proposals for our northern cities. It leads to complete incredulity among my constituents and those of the wider Sheffield city region when the Government talk about the northern powerhouse over and again and then take a decision to move civil service jobs out of Sheffield and back to London which seems completely contradictory to their own policy on devolution. People just do not get it. I mentioned this in an intervention on the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat). It was good to hear his excellent and well-thought-out contribution, which shows that there is real cross-party concern across the House about this aspect of Government policy, where it is going, and how it does not really fit in with the overall Government approach on devolution that we would want to see.

As the hon. Gentleman rightly said, the location of civil service jobs is not the only reason for a totality of approach through the northern powerhouse. Indeed, it is probably not even the main reason. The main reason is to try to secure a growth in GDP per head in our northern cities to get them up towards the national average, because currently not one single northern city has a GDP per head that is equivalent to the national average, and that is a matter of concern. It is also about trying to ensure that decision making takes place nearer to those who are affected by it, and that we recognise that different approaches and policies will be formed in different areas as part of the process of trying to improve public services and their delivery and to get the increase in GDP per head that we want to see. This approach is going to change the way in which our country is governed if we carry it through and onwards in the next few years.

What people see on the ground in terms of this policy is the Government talking about a grand design with the northern powerhouse but saying one thing and doing another. People do not understand the general direction of Government travel. They hear Ministers talking about the northern powerhouse and then see the reality of jobs being moved out of their home city and transferred down to London without, as far as they can tell, any good reason. If the Minister is intent on pursuing a policy that seems, at least at face value, to be contradictory to the overall thrust of Government devolution policy, there has to be a very good, explicit and clear reason why that policy is going to be carried through. The Minister has to be able to justify this to the House, as well as to my constituents.

Is the policy being followed through because of clear, demonstrable and provable cost benefits, with figures that can be laid before the House to show what those benefits are, or because Ministers can demonstrate that there is a clear policy benefit—that policy will be unequivocally better and Ministers will be better advised—to having all their civil servants located in one place? Could it not work just as well with two hubs as with one, if Ministers want a concentration of policy making? If Ministers cannot demonstrate that there will be either a clear and explicit cost saving or demonstrable benefits in policy advice to Ministers, why on earth are they pursuing a policy that seems completely contradictory to the overall thrust of Government devolution policy?

The Government have been given a challenge: produce the McKinsey report, the McKinsey papers or the McKinsey input into decision making—whatever it is—or produce some cost-benefit analysis. Ministers must have such analysis at their disposal. They cannot have taken this decision, or be about to take this decision, without having any figures before them. Will they share those figures with the House, or at least commit to making all the information available to the NAO so that it can conduct an audit into the decision? That would enable the NAO at least to advise Members of the House about whether Ministers have taken this decision, or will take this decision—I hope that it has not yet been made—on clear and credible facts and figures about the financial benefits of their proposals.

6.51 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I thank the Backbench Business Committee and the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who has doggedly pursued the matter. He gave us a precise dissection of the numerous issues at the heart of this
decision, or proposal, and the many questions that are still to be answered. The hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), a colleague of mine on the Public Accounts Committee and the Public Accounts Committee, who is not in his place at the moment, made a thoughtful contribution in support of decentralisation, using his experience as an example. The right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) raised the question of the McKinsey report, or papers, and whether it indeed exists. He called for the work that was done to be released to allow for proper scrutiny.

The hon. Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) made clear his support for the calls from the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee and the Public Accounts Committee for clarity and for the proposal to be looked at by the NAO. He also raised the concerns of those who have benefited from the dispersal of jobs from London to his constituency. I am certain that Scottish Members await with interest clarification around the Minister’s comment about initial centres of excellence in Glasgow, for example. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) made a thoughtful contribution highlighting the many benefits that were placed at risk by the decision, and she said that cost and perspective were important elements that needed to be looked at.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) made an excellent contribution, with a particular focus on how unhealthy it is to locate key decision makers in a place that is so very different from all other areas of the UK. He gave numerous examples of areas outside our capital city in Scotland that have benefited from Government dispersal policies. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) called for all Departments to sign up to the concept of devolution.

Offices and staff should be moved out of this overheated, overvalued and ridiculously overpriced city to take up residence in less expensive areas, which, frankly, could do with the Government investing in them for a change. As budgets are being slashed by this Chancellor, who seems to be channelling Sweeney Todd, why is the cost of concentrating offices and staff in London not becoming the major issue? As a number of Members have commented, the Chancellor’s most recent Budget—at least, I think it was the most recent one; lately, a new Budget seems to come along every few weeks—showed that the Chancellor thought that moving offices out of London would be a good idea. Unfortunately, some of his colleagues and senior civil servants do not share his vision, and the shrinkage of Government continues. The Government are becoming smaller geographically, with a smaller workforce, but that will not save money.

I was pleased to take part in recent the Westminster Hall debate on this issue. To me and many others, the upshot seemed to be that Ministers wanted their civil servants close to them. Apparently, a bit of distance dilutes a civil servant’s message. My staff are about 400 miles from here. I have already annoyed them twice today, and I am going to call them as soon as I get out of here, just because I can. We use telephones; Ministers might have heard of them. It is quite amazing how I can talk to someone who is not nearby. With a bit of practice, I think Ministers could learn to use the telephone. If that does not suit them, there is another thing that my friends and I use. It is called the internet. That, too, would allow Ministers to communicate with civil servants in distant lands, such as Sheffield. Far better than that the ridiculous situation of moving the offices of the northern powerhouse into the southern hothouse.

Quite how civil servants are expected to do their jobs when they are being held at such a distance from the subjects in which they specialise is anyone’s guess. It smacks of the days when the UK Government thought that they could pontificate from a Whitehall office and tell large chunks of the world how to behave. The British empire attitude saw nothing wrong with a Whitehall Minister telling people on the other side of the world what to do, but surely we have moved on from that. For the sake of us all, and for the sake of good government, let us get offices and staff moved out of London. Let us spread them around the UK. If they have a geographical remit, let us base them in the areas that they are supposed to be helping. Surely, that is nothing more or less than common sense.

6.56 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I join Members in paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) and the other Members who secured this important debate. We have had a good debate, and I am pleased to see the Secretary of State and the Minister of State in their places to listen to the advice they have been given, by Members from all parties, about what needs to be done. I sincerely hope that they listen to the comments that have been made, take them on board and go away after the debate and act on them.

On 28 January, the closure of the BIS office in Sheffield was announced, with the loss of 247 jobs. I remind the Secretary of State that he said at the time that the closure was to save money. The Minister of State told the House the following day, in response to an urgent question, that “we take the view that this is the best way to spend public money more efficiently and more effectively.”—[Official Report, 29 January 2016; Vol. 605, c. 562.] Yet Members from all parts of the House have challenged what both Ministers said at the time, because of a lack of evidence and a lack of any kind of business case. We have heard today some of the evidence about costs, including the fact that staff in Sheffield are employed at an accommodation cost of £3,190 each, while at Victoria Street in London the figure is more than three times as high, at £9,750. Adding London weighting takes the figure well over £12,000. That is hardly a case of saving money.

What is the reason for closing the Sheffield BIS office? A number of suggestions have been made. Is it so Ministers can have water-cooler conversations with staff in Whitehall? Is it part of a desperate scramble for cash to plug the Chancellor’s black hole, as the BIS proposal for the privatisation of the Land Registry appears to be? Or is it because the Government know that many staff will leave and costs will be reduced as a result? Whatever the reason, the Minister and the Secretary
of State really should tell us. They should tell us what the strategy is and how the plan will work, because, so far, what BIS has come up with does not seem to add up in any way, shape or form.

As we have heard, in the Budget, the Bridge report and the estate strategy, there is a cross-government move to recruit high-calibre staff outside London and to move Departments out of London to continue a trend that has been going on since the 1960s. Other Departments recognise the benefits of a diversified civil service, so why is BIS moving in the opposite direction? Staff in BIS have been told that Ministers need their advisers closer to them, but why do other Departments take the opposite view? Why, after the initial announcement, were staff later told that the move was due to computers and phones not working properly? I know that the quality of our broadband service is one of the poorest of any major economy, but even so we might be forgiven for thinking that the IT systems could be fixed even by this Government. To give an example elsewhere in Government, the Department for Education says on the subject of the benefits of a regional approach:

“We benefit from maintaining sites around the country—we get alternative perspectives on our policy issues, we can draw from anything but accept redundancy.

The many experienced staff who do not wish to relocate to London will of course leave a gap at BIS at a time when it faces serious challenges wherever we look, such as in the steel crisis and the need for significant support for manufacturing, and in the delay announced by the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise to the introduction of the pubs code and in setting up the office of small business commissioner. All those important and demanding policy areas will need the expertise of experienced civil servants. In Sheffield, there is a need to support our universities and the ambitious plans for a mass expansion of apprenticeships. Such a need for experienced staff to give top-quality advice to Ministers could not be more important; yet BIS is taking a big gamble with its ability to do its job as many of those experienced staff will leave. That point made has been made in the House of Lords by the BIS Minister, Baroness Neville-Rolfe.

I want to pay tribute to hon. Members who have spoken in this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central spoke with great expertise, and from his experience of talking to staff who are his constituents, about the benefits of regional offices. The hon. Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) made some excellent comments about the importance of the work that goes on in his constituency, including in the Insolvency Service. He supported requests for proper evidence to be provided to support, and to help us to understand, the proposals made by BIS.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron), who secured the Westminster Hall debate, made the point that the success of BIS in its current location is crucial for his constituents and those of several other Members of the House. He mentioned the lack of relocation expenses, and he might have added the lack of extended travel cover as another reason why these experienced members of staff simply cannot do anything but accept redundancy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) talked about the apparent thumbs down to the staff in BIS by the Department’s leadership, which is in stark contrast to the excellence of the many people who work there. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) questioned the Government’s commitment to their own devolution agenda given their decision to move the centre for the northern powerhouse to London and away from the north itself.

We have had excellent contributions from Members on both sides of the House, including the hon. Members for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin), for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) and, indeed, for Warrington South (David Mowat), who pointed out the contradiction between this move and the northern powerhouse and the contradiction between the “BIS 2020” document and the estate strategy.

So much has been made by Ministers of the so-called northern powerhouse. Having a network of Government offices and key staff in the regions is a vital part of understanding the needs of the whole country and avoiding the sense that all policy is solely about the Westminster bubble. It is therefore baffling, at the very least, that BIS of all Departments might even consider withdrawing from the regions, given the importance that Ministers say they ascribe to the northern powerhouse. BIS should be the eyes and ears of Government out and about in building key local relationships with business, universities, colleges, local government and, of course, trade unions. Why are the trade unions saying that they have not been allowed to have discussions with management about the proposals? There is also of course the message received by the private sector and local communities that the Government just are not serious about supporting the north. I am afraid that actions speak louder than words, and the term “the northern powerhouse” is more and more becoming just a set of words, and meaningless ones at that.

It strikes me that the way the Government are going about their reorganisation has not exactly been business-like. For a start, a forward-looking business would use technology to communicate. Video conferencing is available at the touch of a button and is a very cost-effective way of working, because it saves travel costs and time. I do not know whether the Secretary of State has ever used video conferencing. When he was in Australia at the time of the Tata Steel debacle, he could have used it to speak to people in Mumbai at the annual general meeting that he should have tried to attend to look after our steel industry. [Interruption.] If he turns around to talk to someone behind him, he should perhaps expect me to make such comments. [Interruption.] I am sorry; it was a board meeting. I appreciate the Secretary of State correcting me about the meeting in Mumbai.

Video conferencing and other technologies allow staff to work around the country, closer to home and to family, and to be more productive. Simply put, it is common practice for national and international businesses to have a strong regional presence and to use technology where possible. Should the Government not be at the forefront of using technology? Of course they should.

In any restructuring, would not business produce a sound business plan? Such a plan would evaluate the costs and benefits of the current arrangements set against those of the alternatives. Yet we have not been given a
It has been out for consultation, and I very much hope the proposal, but a final decision has not been made. Office. I make the point that, yes, we have put forward debate the 247 people who currently work in the Sheffield that I would like.

I would like to respond to the points he made, but in the time allowed to me I do not. That may include the hon. Gentleman, those hon. Members whose questions I do not answer was not. I will of course write with an answer to all those people seemed to think it was my choice. It certainly was not.

Whatever it is, the evidence will show. The Minister needs to put that evidence in the public domain, so that it can undergo proper scrutiny, including by the two Select Committees and through consultation with the trade unions, and decisions can be taken on a full evidence base? We need to know whether this is a cost saving, an improvement in policy, or a combination. Whatever it is, the evidence will show. The Minister needs to put that evidence in the public domain and show us, either way, so that proper decisions can be taken, and full public scrutiny of those decisions can show whether the Government are right.

7.10 pm

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this debate through the Backbench Business Committee. It has been a very good debate. A number of hon. Members from both sides of the House have raised a number of very good points. I know that the clock is against me—that is the rule of Parliament. The last time I said that people seemed to think it was my choice. It certainly was not. I will of course write with an answer to all those hon. Members whose questions I do not answer in my response. That may include the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman, in this respect: his questions were quite long, and I do not have time to answer them all at length. I will deal with the points he made, but in the time allowed to me I will not be able to answer them all in the sort of length that I would like.

It is very important that we have as the focus of this debate the 247 people who currently work in the Sheffield office. I make the point that, yes, we have put forward the proposal, but a final decision has not been made. It has been out for consultation, and I very much hope that a number of hon. Members took part in that consultation. A final decision will not be made until 23 May. Everyone on both sides of this House will know that Governments of whatever colour have at times to make very difficult decisions, but we have to be sure that we make the right decisions for the right reasons.

I also make this point, which is very important. Whatever the decision on Sheffield, 83% of the people who work for BIS will continue to work outside London. To some extent, I take a little exception to the suggestion that we in BIS are not in touch with what is going on in the rest of the country outside London. The Secretary of State and I do not represent London seats; as hon. Members might imagine, we return to our constituencies. Most importantly, we still have an exceptionally fine team of local BIS civil servants working throughout the whole country, who feed in—indeed, I have at least a monthly meeting with them—when they give me a round-up of everything that has happened across the country.

By way of example, the Green Investment Bank is proudly based in Edinburgh. UK Trade & Investment exists throughout the whole country. Today, I have been on a visit in Leicestershire, where I opened the marvellous new extension of an excellent business. Not only did I then meet the Leicester Asian Business Association, but, as I often do, I met the local enterprise partnership. I say to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) that when I come to Sheffield on 23 May, it will be a pleasure to meet him and have him there at my visit to those strong prospects. I will also meet the LEP, because getting that feedback is so essential.

I turn now to the reasons behind the proposal. It is really important to set this in the right context. That context is a mixture, of course, of the financial position that we are in and the decisions that we have rightly made to make sure that we have a budget that we can cope with and that BIS plays its part in reducing overall spend. But it is not just about cutting money. It is about making sure that this Department works as efficiently and effectively as possible. The situation that the Secretary of State and I inherited was the frankly historical problem of an abundance of sites. A decision has been taken, against that financial background—I hope that this answers the questions of the right hon. Members for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) and for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg)—

Kevin Barron: It is cost cutting.

Anna Soubry: It is not as simple as cutting costs. The right hon. Gentleman, with his great experience in and out of government, should know that. It is a question of making sure that we have an efficient and effective way of working in BIS, set against the financial restraints that we have quite properly put upon our Department as part of our overall requirements with regard to the deficit.

Our current HQ office locations are based on the legacy I mentioned, and have resulted in a complicated map of management relationships, with work in policy teams spread across 14 different locations. We are committed to reducing our headcount by 2020. That will involve becoming more flexible and redeploying fewer staff quickly to new priorities. We need simple structures that allow staff to interact through quicker, less cumbersome means and stay close to each other in flexible teams. We
rightly put a strong emphasis on staff engagement, excellent management, visible leadership and developing and coaching our staff. Those are harder to achieve if teams are not collected together or are not working under the same roof. We believe that having a single-site BIS policy headquarters is the best way to preserve our effectiveness. Given that our teams serve Ministers in Parliament, those headquarters have to be in London.

I want to make this point absolutely clear. Whatever the decision, we will continue to provide good and full support to the 247 members of staff who have had this proposal hanging over them—we are very conscious of that—since 28 January. If the decision is made to close the Sheffield office, that support will continue, because this Department takes its duty of care to each and every one of our staff extremely seriously, as I hope hon. Members would imagine.

I have said that tough decisions have to be made. The hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) and his colleagues on the Scottish National party Benches will understand that, for Governments of all colours, there are times, set against a difficult financial background, when tough decisions have to be taken. I make no criticism of the SNP’s decision back in 2013 to close 10 sheriff courts and seven justice of the peace courts, with operations transferred to other locations. Those are the difficult decisions that have to be made. Of course, the SNP closures were justified as cost-saving measures, but, to be fair, as part of a wider reform of the justice system as well. We can all take away from that the fact that the SNP was not just cutting things for the sake of savings, but was doing so as part of a broader strategy.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP) rose—

Anna Soubry: Unfortunately, the clock is against me, and the hon. Gentleman has only just walked into this debate, so I am even less disposed to take his intervention.

Those are the difficult decisions that Governments have to make if they are to fulfil their duty, which is not only to make sure that we live within our means but to ensure that we act efficiently and effectively.

I will deal with the four questions that the hon. Member for Sheffield Central asked me—I am grateful for the email and attachment that he sent to my Department. Some of what he raised has already been dealt with by the permanent secretary in his evidence to the various Committees. I will take just the sharp end of the hon. Gentleman’s questions. He asked what assessment had been made of the cost of replacing jobs and moving them to London. A full assessment has not yet been made, but, as he will know from the evidence of the permanent secretary, the total over time for the Sheffield office was thought to be some £14 million. As I have said, however, this is not just about costs. As for the assessment of the cost of replacing Sheffield jobs in London, the final decision has not been taken, and until it has been and we know all its ramifications it will not be possible to give that assessment.

The hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members asked about the northern powerhouse, but I do not need to be told what a great and wonderful city Sheffield is. You do not need to know, Madam Deputy Speaker, about my connections with Sheffield, or the fact that my family comes from there—[Interruption.] Exactly. Because I am from north Nottinghamshire, I spent a great deal of my youth in Sheffield. It was an outstanding city, then, just as it is now and will no doubt be in future. In our devolution deal, we have put Sheffield at the heart of south Yorkshire, and we have delivered millions of pounds to Sheffield—[Interruption.] Which part of the Sheffield city deal do Labour Members not understand?

[Anna Soubry]

The final question from the hon. Member for Sheffield Central concerned what other options there are apart from the proposal. Full consultation has taken place with unions and staff, and several alternative proposals have been received. The BIS executive board will take full account of those when reaching its decision on the proposal, and I hope that goes some way to answering his question.

In conclusion, I wish to pay a full and handsome tribute to all staff in BIS. We take their future, work conditions, and the contribution they have made very seriously, but sometimes tough decisions have to be made. This is not just about saving money; it is also about ensuring that the Department works effectively and efficiently, and that is what we seek to achieve.

7.22 pm

Paul Blomfield: I thank the Minister, the shadow Minister, and all Members who have contributed to what has been a thoughtful debate, with a cross-party consensus in support of the central thrust of Government policy to devolve jobs, but with concern expressed about this decision. I acknowledge and am grateful for the Minister’s frank reply in saying that no full assessment of the costs has been made. The motion simply seeks what other Members have called for, namely a proper cost-benefit analysis so that any decision can be made on the basis of demonstrable and provable facts, and the commitment that all that information will be available—perhaps through the National Audit Office, as we suggest—before the BIS board makes its decision. That is an important step, and I thank Members for their participation.

David Mowat: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Anna Soubry: I do not wish to be rude to my hon. Friend, but the clock is against me and Madam Deputy Speaker is urging me to conclude my remarks.

The final question from the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath concerned what other options there are apart from the proposal. Full consultation has taken place with unions and staff, and several alternative proposals have been received. The BIS executive board will take full account of those when reaching its decision on the proposal, and I hope that goes some way to answering his question.

In conclusion, I wish to pay a full and handsome tribute to all staff in BIS. We take their future, work conditions, and the contribution they have made very seriously, but sometimes tough decisions have to be made. This is not just about saving money; it is also about ensuring that the Department works effectively and efficiently, and that is what we seek to achieve.

David Mowat: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Blomfield: I am not sure that I am allowed to give way, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for all his support in this debate and the points that he has made, and I very much commend his double-hub strategy. I am grateful to the Minister for saying that no final
decision has yet been taken, and for acknowledging that no cost assessment has been made, which is frankly extraordinary. I hope that a decision will now be made, and I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House notes with concern the Business, Innovation and Skills Department’s proposal to close its Sheffield policy office, moving 247 posts to London; further notes that the Sheffield BIS office proposal runs counter to the Government’s welcome commitment to create a public sector that reflects the diverse nature of the UK following the publication of the Bridge report and also to the commitment in Budget 2016 to move civil servants out of expensive Whitehall accommodation; and therefore calls on the National Audit Office to conduct a cost benefit assessment of the BIS Sheffield proposal.

Energy Bill [Lords]

Consideration of Lords message

After Clause 79

ONSHELITE WIND GENERATING STATIONS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

7.24 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 7TB.

Here we are again to discuss this Bill, and in particular the delivery of our manifesto commitment to end new subsidies for onshore wind. The other place has seen fit yet again to try to overturn that manifesto commitment, and to seek to impose further costs on consumer bills, but this Chamber, and this Government, are determined not to put up with that. As I made clear on 20 April, the Government are intent on bringing forward the closure of the renewables obligation to new onshore wind in Great Britain. I therefore urge the House to support the Government’s motion to disagree with the Lords amendment.

The Government signalled their intent well before last May’s general election, so I will not repeat that evidence again. I remind the House, however, that even with cost control measures in place, our estimates show that we are on track to deliver 35% of the UK’s electricity from renewables in 2020-21, exceeding our stated ambition of 30%. That is up from 9% in 2011—quite an achievement—and we simply do not need more subsidised onshore wind. The costs for this established technology continue to fall, so it is right that we should scale back support and let the industry stand on its own two feet. The Government’s policy—a manifesto commitment—has now been agreed twice in this House, yet we now have an amendment from the other place that is similar to that previously rejected by this House, and relates to projects that did not have planning permission on 18 June last year.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am sure the Minister has seen the evidence because she will come before the Scottish Affairs Committee in the next couple of weeks, and we are currently undertaking a review and inquiry into the impact that this policy is having on the sector in Scotland. The evidence we have secured is dramatic and suggests that confidence has been sucked out of the sector. There is a lack of investment, no movement, and a sector that was growing, prospering, and delivering targets is now in real fear of being decimated by the Government’s policy. What does the Minister say to businesses in my constituency that are dependent on that sector, and whose legs have been pulled from under them?

Andrea Leadsom: How does the hon. Gentleman feel about the bill payers and those in fuel poverty? How does he feel about a clear commitment to achieving a certain level of renewables deployment and no further? There must be a balance, and we believe that the right balance has been struck.

The projects that this amendment would allow to access the grace period did not have planning permission as at 18 June last year. Allowing such projects to access
the grace period would lead to an increase in deployment, adding more costs to consumer bills. The 18 June 2015 was set out as a clear bright line, and we have continued to maintain the importance of that as a clear cut-off date. Tampering with such an integral part of the early closure policy at such a late stage in the passage of the Bill is simply not on, and it is extremely disappointing that Opposition peers in the other place persist with an approach that will add to consumer bills. Conservative Members are on the side of the consumer. It is our duty as consumer champions to keep costs down, and that is what we will do.

Let us remember that this money comes directly from people’s bills. While Labour Members oppose measures to control costs for families and businesses and to keep bills down, we are clear that we can only expect bill payers to support low-carbon electricity if costs are controlled. If we do not take action and we let subsidies spiral, families and businesses will suffer.

The Government’s policy takes a balanced approach and we have a proven track record on renewable electricity. Last year for the first time ever, renewable sources provided more power over the year than coal, with nearly one quarter of the UK’s electricity generated by renewables. The Government remain committed to the move towards a low-carbon economy in a way that minimises costs to consumers.

This Bill is a key part of the Government’s commitment to the oil and gas industry on the UK continental shelf. At this very challenging time for the oil and gas sector, it is extremely disappointing that the persistent disagreement from the Lords on an unrelated issue is now risking timely implementation of these powers which enjoy the support of both Houses and are so crucial to the industry at this difficult time.

Dr Whitehead: I believe we referred to the manifesto commitments the Minister mentioned during the passage of the Bill as something of a flexible friend. The Minister is quoting a manifesto commitment that was not actually in the Conservative party 2015 general election manifesto. The manifesto commitment was for no new subsidies for onshore wind. The Bill puts that in place, but provides for a number of grace periods for the consequence of that process. What we are therefore talking about in this debate is not that commitment but the grace periods that follow it. That, essentially, is what the Lords amendment is about. It therefore does not breach manifesto commitments in any way. To do that, the Minister would have to say that the grace periods themselves breach the manifesto commitment. Plainly, the Minister put those grace periods into the Bill. She must therefore accept that the grace periods are a part of the process and not the process itself.

Under the grace periods, if there is a delay in grid connection or a delay in clearance for Radar, then the schemes come into the fold. That is set out in the grace periods in the Bill. If you have been turned down by a planning committee, have appealed and the appeal comes through after the cut-off date, then you come into the fold. If investment facilities have been frozen because of uncertainty about what was going to happen to the Energy Bill and investment documentation could not be shown in time, that comes into the fold of the grace periods.

As matters stand, however, one cannot come into the fold if one has gone down the route of seeking local approval for the scheme, gaining that approval, getting the consent of the local planning committee and negotiating section 106 or section 75 agreements, as would happen once agreement is reached. If the final certificate, which is obtained after agreement has been reached, happens to fall after 18 June 2015, then one does not come into the fold. That is especially galling for the people going down this route, which they did not have to go down. A central part of the Energy Bill is that onshore generating schemes should proceed in future only if they have the support of the local communities in which they are to be sited, which might be determined by the grant of locally based planning permission. Clause 78 expressly removes the requirement for consent by the Secretary of State. If one has gone down that route and done everything by the rules that the Energy Bill wants to put in place, one is outside the fold if everything is not in place, even after permission has been granted, by 18 June 2015.

Let us imagine the scene when the managers of the Bill sat down to draft what was always clearly supposed to be a sequence of exceptions to the clear bright line as described by the Minister: the cut-off date and circumstances of the cut-off for new onshore windfarms.
The amendment saves money, therefore, as well as placing equity back into the grace periods. It is of course down to the Government to get their legislation on to the statute books. We have supported most of the Bill, which can be passed today, throughout its passage. I trust that they will have the sense not to stand dogmatically in the way of its passage and allow us to sign it off and get going with the vast bulk of the provisions on which we all agree.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I will speak briefly given that we have been here before in this ping-pong process.

This was my first Bill Committee and Reasons Committee—I believe I am already coming up for my second, which is interesting—and we are now down to one key point: there is wide acceptance of the broader need for the Bill, but we are told that if it is so important, we need only accept one more wafer-thin amendment and then it can go through. Conservative Members take the view that a Government could not govern if they did that every time. There are, unfortunately, cut-off points in lots of Bills, and many are unpopular, and although I can understand why people who will lose out are aggrieved, we take the view that the wider principles are incredibly important.

Others have spoken about the Oil and Gas Authority. Every time I have spoken, I have referred to the oil price, which I think is now up to about $49. There is still no sign of stability returning to the sector. Who knows where it will be in weeks if not days, given all that is happening in the world? The measures in relation to the OGA are not a magic wand for the oil sector but will bring an extra level of stability and demonstrate Government support at an incredibly sensitive and important time for what remains one of the UK’s largest industries and one of Scotland’s key industries. We should dispense with this process, move forward and pass the Bill, for the simple reason that it is about the fundamental strength of the UK economy.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): It is with an unfortunate sense of déjà vu that we return to debate an issue we should have put to bed months ago, if not longer. I struggle to recall when the Wood review reported, but it was well in excess of 18 months ago, and as has been said many times, including by me, it was a completely different time in the oil industry’s lifespan. Up to a point, the Government have taken the action expected, but they did so at the time of the Wood review, when things were very different. Further delay should not have happened.

The Bill should have been on the statute books months ago and should not have conflated the OGA with onshore wind. It might have seemed like a neat parliamentary ruse at the time, but it is causing potentially significant damage. The last time we dealt with this—a week or so ago—the Minister told Opposition Members that we should be ashamed of ourselves. The most unedifying aspect of all this is that we are now talking only about projects in Scotland—four Scottish wind farms—and the OGA, which will largely deal with the oil industry in Scotland, and yet this House and that House cannot get their act together to protect two vital Scottish industries. That, for me, is utterly shameful and unacceptable.
[Callum McCaig]

Not content with decimating the wind industry in Scotland, the Tory party, supposedly in the name of public opinion, is twisting the knife in the face of public opinion. The four projects affected by the Bill all got planning permission from the local council. That is the definition of public support, which is what this should be about. There is public support for wind farms that would have significant community benefit. We have talked about the £7 million cost. I wonder how much we would have saved had we not delayed in establishing the OGA and provided it with the teeth it should have had months ago. We are squabbling over a relatively small figure, in the grand scheme of things, compared with the colossal amounts of money the Government will waste on the white elephant at Hinkley Point C. That sticks in my craw and that of folks in Scotland.

The Lords have compromised—good on them—because they want to get a deal done. I am no expert in parliamentary procedure, but the Minister talks about wanting to pass the Bill. It could be done very simply by accepting the amendment. We run the risk, before we prorogue for the Queen’s Speech, of the Bill falling. If that happens it will be a shameful betrayal of the entire cross-party process over the establishment of the OGA, the development of its agenda and the provision of the tools it requires to help our oil industry. That cannot be allowed to happen. The risk is that we sacrifice the OGA on the altar of Tory party dogma on onshore wind. That is utterly unforgivable.

7.45 pm

What is the solution? It is surely a simple one. It is to recognise that, although the manifesto contained a commitment not to have any more onshore wind and to end new subsidies, it did not have an arbitrary date, cast in stone, that no more should happen after that. These schemes all have public support and all got planning permission within six months—I believe—of the election, which is a pretty reasonable timescale to allow for sensible interaction between Government and business. But no. These schemes are to be sacrificed, regardless of the consequences.

I do not know what will happen after this. No doubt we will lose the vote. I do not know if the Lords will continue to fight—they would have every right to—but we need to bring our minds back to the bigger picture. Tens of thousands of jobs are at stake if we do not get the oil and gas support correct.

Pete Wishart: I am loth to interrupt my hon. Friend, who is making a powerful case in defence of the Lords amendment, but I am sure he has seen the evidence submitted to the Scottish Affairs Committee and how the energy has been taken out of the sector because of the Government’s arbitrary decision. He is right that they made a manifesto commitment, but it is totally unacceptable to do this in a year and leave these four plants in a state of limbo. There is a simple way the Government could solve the issue this evening and get the Bill through: accept the amendment, get on with it, deliver the Bill and make sure we do our best for both sectors.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): This is a vital Bill, and there have been plenty of opportunities in this House and the other place to give it proper scrutiny. Having spoken on Second Reading and sat on the Bill Committee, I feel that I am nearly as familiar as the Minister with some of the debates.

I have a particular local interest in the wider issue. A proposed new electricity interconnector facility linking France and the UK comes ashore at Chilling in my constituency. The development, called IFCA2, will provide the capability to export or import more than 1,000 MW of power and provide benefits to consumers through increased flexibility of supply and downwards pressure on prices. It is because I want the Bill enacted that I share the Minister’s frustrations at the continued blocking by the Opposition in the other place. It also defies long-held conventions such as the Salisbury convention, which is that a manifesto commitment of a party elected with a majority of support from the people should be enshrined in law—without opposition from the other place. And we should not forget that the other place gains its majority from Members who come from the Liberal Democrats or other parties that are not elected and do not reflect the political make-up of this elected Chamber. This undermines parliamentary democracy and the will of the general public.

This amendment addresses one of the narrowest aspects of the Bill—and the issue of the cut-off date and potential grace period has become the sticking-point. Debate on the merits of the arguments have been exhausted by now, so I shall not dwell on them too long. We can all appreciate the concern of those directly affected, who understandably want changes in the rules to benefit themselves. They have the right to lobby the Government and put their case. In the end, however, a decision has to be made, and a line needs to be drawn somewhere. Every deadline is arbitrary in some sense because it draws such a line. Some will be on one side and some on the other side. The fact of setting a deadline itself, however, cannot be considered unfair—otherwise we would be unable to set them at all.

The hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) put forward a proposal for a grace period, but where will it end? Some people will benefit; others will not. The Government have made a very clear commitment to this policy in their manifesto, and I support it.

Pete Wishart: Tory ideology.

Callum McCaig: It is. It is an ideological attack, and despite the potential consequences for wider industry sectors, they are happy to see it happen. We have this squabble over an issue in Scotland between the unelected House of Lords and a Government who, with their sole Tory representative, might as well be unelected in Scotland. We are talking about grace periods. Thus far, the Government have acted completely and utterly without grace. It is not too late to change that.

Most countries would be proud of the wind industry that has developed in the last decade or so. It should not be seen as a burden, as it apparently is; it contributes massively to jobs, to reducing our carbon emissions and to tackling the great threat of climate change. But—again—no, because it upsets a few folks!
**Question put.** That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 7TB.

*The House divided: Ayes 286, Noes 260.*

**Division No. 264**

[7.51 pm]

**AYES**

Adams, Nigel  
Afriyie, Adam  
Aldous, Peter  
Allan, Lucy  
Allen, Heidi  
Amess, Sir David  
Andrew, Stuart  
Ansell, Caroline  
Argar, Edward  
Bacon, Mr Richard  
Baker, Mr Steve  
Baldwin, Harriett  
Barclay, Stephen  
Baron, Mr John  
Barwell, Gavin  
Bebb, Guto  
Bellingham, Sir Henry  
Beresford, Sir Paul  
Berry, Jake  
Berry, James  
Bingham, Andrew  
Blackman, Bob  
Blackwood, Nicola  
Blunt, Crispin  
Bolsover, Nick  
Bone, Mr Peter  
Borwick, Victoria  
Bradley, Karen  
Brady, Mr Graham  
Brazier, Mr Julian  
Bridgen, Andrew  
Brine, Steve  
Brokenshire, Sir James  
Bruce, Fiona  
Buckland, Robert  
Burns, Conor  
Burns, Mr Simon  
Burrowes, Mr David  
Burt, Alistair  
Cairns, Sir Alun  
Cain, Mr Julian  
Carling, Andrew  
Carnegy, Maria  
Carlaw, Jamie  
Cardiff, James  
Cawthorn, Maria  
Chalk, Alex  
Chishti, Rehman  
Churchill, Jo  
Clark, Mr Greg  
Cleverly, James  
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey  
Coffey, Mr Therese  
Collins, Damian  
Colville, Oliver  
Costa, Alberto  
Crabb, Mr Stephen  
Davies, David T. C.  
Davies, Glyn  
Davies, Dr James  
Davies, Ms Mims  
Davis, Mr Mark  
Dinenage, Caroline  
Donaldson, Mr Jeffrey  
Donelan, Michelle  
Double, Steve  
Dowden, Oliver  
Dowlett, Ben  
Huddleston, Nigel  
Hunt, Mr Jeremy  
Jackson, Mr Stewart  
Javid, Mr Sajid  
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil  
Jenkinson, Andrea  
Jennick, Robert  
Johnson, Boris  
Johnson, Gareth  
Jones, Lord Joseph  
Jones, Andrew  
Jones, Mr David  
Jones, Mr Marcus  
Kawczynski, Daniel  
Kennedy, Seema  
Kirk, Sir Simon  
Knight, Sir George  
Knight, Julian  
Kwarteng, Kwasi  
Latham, Pauline  
Leadsom, Andrea  
Lee, Dr Phillip  
Lefroy, Jeremy  
Leigh, Sir Edward  
Leslie, Charlotte  
Letwin, Mr Oliver  
Lewis, Brandon  
Lewis, Mr Julian  
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian  
Lidding, Mr David  
Lilley, Mr Peter  
Lopresti, Jack  
Lord, Jonathan  
Loughton, Tim  
Lumley, Karen  
Mackinlay, Craig  
Mackintosh, David  
Main, Mrs Anne  
Mak, Mr Alan  
Malthouse, Kit  
Mann, Scott  
Mathias, Dr Tania  
May, Mrs Theresa  
Maynard, Paul  
McCafferty, Jason  
McLoughlin, Mr Patrick  
Menzies, Mark  
Mercer, Johnny  
Merriman, Huw  
Metalfe, Stephen  
Miller, Mrs Maria  
Milling, Amanda  
Mills, Nigel  
Milton, Mr Anne  
Mordaunt, Penny  
Morgan, Sir Nicky  
Morris, Anne Marie  
Morris, David  
Morris, James  
Morton, Wendy  
Mowat, David  
Murray, Mrs Sherryl  
Murrison, Dr Andrew  
Newton, Sarah  
Nokes, Caroline  
Norman, Jessae  
Nuttall, Mr David  
O’Hara, Mr Matthew  
Opperman, Guy  
Parish, Neil  
Paton, Mr Raila  
Pawsey, Mark  
Penning, Mr Mike  
Penrose, John  
Percy, Andrew  
Perry, Claire  
Phillips, Stephen  
Philip, Chris  
Pickles, Mr Eric  
Pincher, Christopher  
Pom, Ms Rebecca  
Prentis, Victoria  
Pursgrove, Tom  
Quin, Jeremy  
Quince, Will  
Raab, Mr Dominic  
Redwood, Mr John  
Robertson, Mr Laurence  
Robinson, Gavin  
Robinson, Mary  
Rosindell, Andrew  
Rudd, Mr Amber  
Rutley, David  
Sandbach, Antoinette  
Scully, Paul  
Seelos, Andrew  
Shannon, Ms Jim  
Shapps, Mr Grant  
Sharma, Alok  
Shelbrooke, Alec  
Simpson, David  
Simpson, Mr Keith  
Skidmore, Chris  
Smith, Chloe  
Smith, Mr Henry  
Smith, Mr Julian  
Smith, Royston  
Solloway, Amanda  
Soubry, Mr Anna  
Spencer, Mark  
Stephenson, Andrew  
Stewart, Iain  
Stewart, Rory  
Streeter, Rory  
Stride, Mel  
Stuart, Graham  
Sturdy, Julian  
Sund, Rishi  
Swain, Mr Desmond  
Swire, Mr Hugo  
Symes, Mr Robert  
Thomas, Derek  
Throup, Maggie  
Timpson, Edward  
Tohur, Kelly  
Tomlinson, Justin  
Tomlinson, Michael  
Tracey, Craig  
Tredinnick, David  
Trevelyan, Ms Anne-Marie  
Tugendhat, Tom  
Turner, Mr Andrew  
Tyrie, Mr Andrew  
Vaizey, Mr Edward  
Vara, Mr Shailesh  
Vickers, Martin  
Walker, Mr Charles  
Walker, Mr Robin  
Warman, Matt  
Watkinson, Dame Angela  
Wharton, James  
Whately, Helen  
Wheeler, Heather
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy

**Tellers for the Ayes:**
George Hollingbery and
Margot James

**NOES**
Abbott, Ms Diane
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Anderson, Mr David
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barrett, Jonathan
Barron, rh Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berg, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Bossell, Philip
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnton, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Caddy, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Justin
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Cox, Jo
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Angela
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne

Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Carol
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGarry, Natalie
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
McMahon, Jim
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Milliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morris, Grahame M.
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
O'Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onurrah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Steven

Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Shepheard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Michelle
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Wright, Mr lain
Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Noes:**
Jessica Morden and
Vicky Foxcroft
Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 7TB disagreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H), That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendment 7TB.

That James Cartlidge, Andrea Leadsom, Holly Lynch, Callum McCaig, Paul Maynard, Julian Smith and Dr Alan Whitehead be members of the Committee.

That Andrea Leadsom be the Chair of the Committee.

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(Julian Smith.)

Question agreed to.

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

### Housing and Planning Bill

**Consideration of Lords message**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Before I call the Minister, I wish to repeat what Mr Speaker said on 25 April about Lords amendments and financial privilege: designation of such amendments is not a matter of choice, and it has no bearing on the freedom of the House to debate and decide on them.

I must also tell the House that, as Mr Speaker then said, he has asked the Procedure Committee to inquire into the so-called privilege reason, and the Clerk has prepared a memorandum for its consideration.

I draw the House’s attention to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendments 47B and 47C. If the House agrees to them, I will cause an appropriate entry to be made in the Journal.

I must inform the House that five of the motions relating to the Lords amendments are certified as relating exclusively to England and one both to England and to England and Wales, as set out on the selection paper. If the House divides on a certified motion, a double majority—or, in the latter case, a triple majority—will be required for the motion to be passed.

### Clause 4

**PLANNING PERMISSION: PROVISION OF STARTER HOMES**

8.5 pm

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis):** I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 10B.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

- Lords amendments 47B and 47C, and Government motion to disagree.
- Government motion to insist on Lords amendment 97A and disagree to Lords amendment 97B.
- Lords amendment 108, Government motion to disagree, and amendment (a) in lieu.
- Lords amendment 109B.
- Lords amendment 110, Government motion to disagree, and amendment (a) in lieu.

**Brandon Lewis:** Let me begin by informing the House that I am placing in the Library today the Department’s analysis of the application of Standing Order 83O in respect of the Lords amendments.

We find ourselves here again, and, enjoyable as that may be, and while I thank those in the other place for not insisting on their amendments relating to a number of issues, I am very surprised that they have chosen again to oppose one of our most important manifesto commitments, namely the commitment to ensure that more homes are built: homes that we need, and homes that young people are crying out for. Last week we heard from many Members, in the Chamber, about the people who had asked them when starter homes would be available. We need to get on with helping those people to fulfil their dreams and get on to the home ownership ladder. Some 86% of our population want to be given a chance to do that.
Lords amendment 10B allows local authorities to meet their starter home requirement with other low-cost home ownership products. The amendment would again totally undermine our manifesto commitment to build 200,000 starter homes by 2020.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Is my hon. Friend, like me, struggling to remember a case in which a policy that was the subject of a clear manifesto commitment, and had received the assent of the elected House by more than 100 votes, was struck down and circumscribed by the unelected, unaccountable panjandrums in the House of Lords?

Brandon Lewis: I have certainly not heard the position put so eloquently before. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am used to seeing the Labour party trying to stop people’s aspiration to own their homes, but it is beyond astonishing that the upper House should try to amend a measure that has received such a clear message of support from this elected Chamber, and in respect of which we have an election mandate to help young people.

If Lords amendment 10B were passed, the requirement for starter homes would become something entirely different: at best, the amendment shows a lack of understanding, and at worst it seeks to wreck important Government policy. That is unacceptable, not only to me but, I trust, to the House of Commons. The Joint Committee on Conventions made its view clear in its 2006 report “Conventions of the UK Parliament”, which states:

“A manifesto Bill is not subject to ‘wrecking amendments’ which change the Government’s manifesto intention as proposed in the Bill.”

The noble Lords have done this not once, but twice. As was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson)—whose party, I note, was successful last Thursday—we sent a clear message, with an overwhelming majority, to the other place last week. We want our young people to have the chance of full home ownership, allowing them to move onwards and upwards over time. That is what the starter homes policy is all about, and we have a clear manifesto mandate to deliver it.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a clear and compelling case. Does he not agree that, at a time when the average age for people to buy their first home is 37 and rising, it is imperative that we get on with the job of supplying homes that people can purchase and live in as a family unit?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point that goes to the heart of what we are seeking to do. With starter homes, shared ownership and other areas of Government policy, we are seeking to deliver homes for people who want to be part of the 86% who aspire to home ownership. Labour Members have often voted against and regularly outlined their opposition to that. We want to support those people; that is what the Bill is about.

Let me make it clear that the starter home requirement will not prevent councils from delivering other forms of affordable housing and home ownership products. For example, shared ownership and other home ownership products are part of the diverse and thriving housing market that we enjoy in this country. They help those who aspire to home ownership but who cannot afford even a discounted purchase. We have published a prospectus in the past couple of weeks that invites housing associations and other providers to bid for £4.7 billion of funding to deliver 135,000 shared ownership homes and £200 million to deliver 10,000 rent-to-buy homes as well.

The Bill focuses on starter homes, creating that new product and kick-starting delivery. We strongly believe that this is the most effective way to meet our manifesto commitment. Let me remind the House that we promised in our manifesto to deliver 200,000 new starter homes exclusively for first-time buyers under 40.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am still a little confused about the position that local authorities will be put in if this amendment falls. They will, I think, still be entering into section 106 negotiations with a developer, part of which will involve a requirement to provide starter homes, but will they also have an ability to provide shared ownership properties and, presumably, affordable homes to rent as well? How will the balance and proportion of those homes be determined? Will that be a matter for local discretion?

Brandon Lewis: Yes, there is no change to the position that has always pertained. It will be for local authorities to negotiate with developers over what they do beyond the requirement for starter homes. We will have a requirement for 20% starter homes, but what the local authorities do beyond that will be a matter for them. My experience of talking to developers is that in some areas where they have negotiated lower levels of affordable housing, the local authorities will be able to deliver more under the starter homes requirement.

Mr Betts: So let me be clear: there will be requirement for 20% starter homes but if, as is the case in most of my constituency, the maximum requirement on sites for affordable housing is a total of 10%, does that mean that there would be nothing other than starter homes on those sites—that is, no other affordable housing?

Brandon Lewis: That will be a matter for the local authority to negotiate. I know from talking to developers in my own constituency, where we have had similar levels of affordable housing, that we will be able to have more affordable housing as a result of the starter homes requirement. Local authorities will be able to deliver more affordable housing through this programme. We will not allow anyone to prevent us from meeting our commitment to deliver those new homes for first-time buyers.

I also want to defend another of our manifesto commitments. Our manifesto made this very clear, and I will quote from it again as I did last week. It stated:

“We will fund the replacement of properties sold under the extended Right to Buy by requiring local authorities to manage their housing assets more efficiently, with the most expensive properties sold off and replaced as they fall vacant.”

We are discussing this again today because the Lords have yet again chosen to send our proposals back, in spite of the overwhelming majority in this House which overturned their last attempt to undermine our election mandate. I am shocked and disappointed by their action. I commend the noble Lord Islwyn, who has a wealth
of knowledge and experience of procedural matters and who chose not to press his amendments any further, recognising the primacy of this, the elected House. I just wish I could say the same about other noble Lords. Lords amendments 47B and 47C, which have been offered in lieu of amendment 47, with which this House has disagreed, are more or less identical to earlier incarnations.

8.15 pm

Let me turn again to the report from the Joint Committee on Conventions. In paragraph 252, it states:

“If the Commons have disagreed to Lords Amendments on grounds of financial privilege, it is contrary to convention for the Lords to send back Amendments in lieu which clearly invite the same response.”

I remind the House that this was a report from a Joint Committee, so it would be reasonable to expect both Houses to respect its conclusions. However, the other place has again tried to block the Government’s ability to negotiate agreements with councils that will deliver value for money for the taxpayer and ensure that housing is delivered, requiring the Government to enter into agreements even where the local authorities have no acceptable plans or truck record of delivery. Their proposals would also significantly reduce the funding available for the voluntary right to buy, again preventing this Government from fulfilling their manifesto commitment. Let me be very clear: this is a wrecking amendment.

I have already said that we will give local authorities with particular needs the opportunity to reach bespoke agreements where they can demonstrate a need, plans that offer good value for money and a strong track record of housing delivery. We need new homes to be built in this country, and we need local authorities working with us to ensure that the right mix of housing is delivered as quickly and efficiently as possible. These amendments would not help to deliver that; in fact, they would hinder it.

This House also unanimously agreed to remove a neighbourhood right of appeal from the Bill. However, the other place has decided to press the issue. I recognise and fully understand the wider support in the other place for a neighbourhood right of appeal and for amendment 97B. However, as I have made clear, the Government cannot support amendments that risk introducing the principle of a third-party right to appeal against a grant of planning permission. That would add more complexity and unpredictability to the planning system, significantly delaying sustainable development and housing delivery. Communities can already request that any local decision to approve an application should be considered for call-in by the Secretary of State.

We have been extremely clear about how strongly we as a Government support neighbourhood plans, having brought them in, and I am always keen to explore further improvements that strengthen a community’s role in local planning—after all, neighbourhood plans are delivering more houses—without sacrificing simplicity or slowing down delivery of the housing we need.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I accept that the Government have reasons—or again rejecting the neighbourhood right of appeal—on which I originally tabled an amendment—but would the Minister accept that there are real concerns about the integrity of neighbourhood planning? It is an important policy, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is particularly keen to promote it. Such neighbourhood plans are undermined by speculative developments, and there needs to be a mechanism to ensure that those neighbourhood plans, once agreed or when close to agreement, are not subverted. It would be in no one’s interest to end up with a developer-led process rather than a plan-led process. Will the Minister agree to introduce more robust measures at some future opportunity?

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have shared platforms and spoken about the strengths and benefits of neighbourhood planning. I know that he feels passionate about this, and I share his desire to ensure that communities have the confidence that, when they draw up a neighbourhood plan, it has weight in law and will be respected by the local authority and by the planning inspector. The call-in process is partly aimed at ensuring that that will be the case.

I am happy to make it clear that I want the law to be strongly in favour of neighbourhood plans. I want them to become the norm everywhere in England. We are well on our way to achieving that, with a record 18 referendums being held last week and hundreds more communities due to complete their plans soon. This makes it even more important not to have amendments coming forward that could carelessly introduce change. We need to ensure that we get this right, and I am happy to tell my right hon. Friend that we will work with him and other colleagues to ensure that we give these neighbourhood plans the confidence and primacy that the Government always intended for them. We must ensure that neighbourhood plans are respected by the decision makers.

I do not believe we should be routinely reopening debate on locally made decisions, which is effectively what this Lords amendment would enable. Those decisions are locally and democratically accountable and they already take into account neighbourhood plans. I ask this House to send the amendment back, while reaffirming my commitment to work with colleagues to ensure that neighbourhood plans enjoy the primacy that we intend them to have in planning law.

I will now turn to Lords reasons 108B and 110B, our disagreement to Lords amendments 108 and 110, and our proposed amendments in lieu of those Lords amendments. As I have said previously, I am not convinced that amendment 108 will help to house those who are desperate for a new home. New homes built in England must currently meet tough energy efficiency standards. As I have said, those standards were strengthened by 30% in the previous Parliament, saving £200 on energy bills compared with the standards prior to 2010. We should be proud of that. To meet those standards, homes have A-rated condensing boilers, double-glazed windows with low-energy glass, high levels of insulation and airtightness in their construction. They are very energy-efficient homes. The amendment would create additional construction costs, which could push some small builders out of the industry completely—at a time when we are trying to encourage more to come back in—by making developing much-needed homes totally unviable in some areas.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The last time the Minister raised this matter, I asked him a question, so I wonder whether he has had the time to swot up on it for this evening. I asked him how much
people would save if the higher standards proposed by the Lords were implemented and how much that would amount to over the lifetime of their homes, which one would expect to be perhaps a minimum of 50 years.

Brandon Lewis: Somebody who buys a home in this country lives in it for an average of seven years and the average cost, depending on the independent expert, could be £3,000 to £4,800. The cost would of course be cheaper on larger sites. On some of the small sites, of which we need more, particularly in rural areas that have a desperate need for housing, it could get up to almost £15,000 on the cost of a home. If somebody lives in a house for an average of seven years, that is a pretty high price to pay.

However, I propose today to place a statutory duty on Government to undertake a review of energy standards for new homes. It will seek evidence on the costs of energy measures and the benefits in fuel bill and carbon savings, which is the right hon. Gentleman’s point. It will identify what is cost-effective to require, and cost-effectiveness must be key not just for developers, but for homeowners. We said in our manifesto that we will meet our climate change commitments and that we will do so by cutting emissions “as cost-effectively as possible”. The electorate voted for that and the review will help to ensure that we can deliver it.

Likewise, I am concerned about the impact of amendment 110 on house building and our ability to bring forward the homes that people need. Flood risk is an incredibly important issue, and I fully understand the strength of feeling on the matter. The Government are committed to ensuring that developments are safe from flooding, and the delivery of sustainable drainage systems is part of our planning policy, which was strengthened just over a year ago. Our policy is still new, as I outlined in more detail last week, and I am willing to consider issues further as it matures. I am happy to review the effectiveness of current policy and legislation on sustainable drainage and to place that commitment on the face of the Bill, so I want to move amendment (a) in lieu of amendment 110.

In conclusion, I want to say something to all Members of both House as we consider a couple of key points. The issues that we are debating and voting on tonight and that the Lords will be considering shortly are about delivering on our general election manifesto and therefore delivering our general election mandate. They are about delivering new homes for the people across our country who are in desperate need of them. It is the democratic right of this House to deliver on the Government’s agenda. We are determined to deliver on our promises to the British people and ask both Houses to respect that mandate.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): We began scrutinising this Bill last autumn, and it was bad at that point. After a string of concessions and 18 defeats, some of its harshest aspects have now been amended, but it still presents a missed opportunity to solve the housing crisis. Since 2010, homelessness and rough sleeping have more than doubled, house prices and private rents have risen dramatically, and the housing benefit bill has ballooned. The Bill does little to tackle the housing crisis head on, and concerns have been raised by housing experts, leading charities, and MPs, councillors and peers from across the political divide, including Conservative council leaders, Conservative peers and Conservative MPs.

Lords amendment 10B would enable starter homes to be built while giving local authorities greater flexibility to deliver other forms of low-cost home ownership products to meet the need in their areas. The amendment seeks to expand the opportunities in the Bill for people to own their own home and gives serious consideration to other forms of affordable ownership. There is now a wide consensus that starter homes, which can cost up to £450,000, will be a big let-down and will be out of reach for young people and families on ordinary incomes—those who need a hand up on to the ladder the most. It is not just in my constituency that starter homes will be unaffordable. Research by Savills and by Shelter both found that starter homes will be unaffordable to families on average incomes in areas across the country.

We agree with the Local Government Association and want the Bill to provide for more affordable homes to rent as well as to buy. We agree that amendment 10B is a big improvement on the Government’s plan to impose starter homes on local communities to the exclusion of other types of affordable homes to buy. The LGA has stated:

“The discretion for local authorities to determine the number of starter homes built locally, alongside affordable homes for rent” is “critical for ensuring new housing meets the needs of communities.”

I was disappointed, but not surprised, to see that the Government will not be supporting amendment 10B. The Government’s focus on starter homes puts at risk other forms of affordable housing, including other forms of affordable home ownership. The Government argued in their manifesto:

“Everyone who works hard should be able to own a home of their own”.

Therefore, the Government will surely want to expand opportunities for home ownership by allowing other forms, rather than exclusively promoting starter homes, which could be unaffordable for many. If someone is over 40, they are excluded from the product altogether. If the Conservative party really does want everyone who works hard to be able to own their own home, there needs to be something for the over-40s. If we are serious about fixing the housing crisis and if the Government are serious about encouraging people on to the housing ladder, they must consider all forms of tenure and not just exclusively encourage starter homes. I hope that they will reconsider their opposition to the amendment.

Lords Amendments 47B and 47C would attempt to ensure that, where needed, councils homes that are sold are replaced on a like-for-like basis. The Bill provides the statutory basis to extend the right to buy to housing association tenants paid for by the forced sale of council homes to the highest bidders, including buy-to-let landlords and overseas investors. The Government have still failed to commit to genuine, like-for-like replacements for homes that were forcibly sold, and we now see that they have marked the amendments as engaging financial privilege. If the Government do not accept the proposal for one-for-one, like-for-like replacements, they need to...
Bill. Although there are many things in this Bill we multiple times, showing the extent of opposition to the concessions in the House of Lords and were defeated statutory review entails; when these reviews will be likely to commence; what a details, missing from the amendments themselves, about them. I hope the Minister will be able to provide further welcome that the Government have committed to reviewing positive step to see these issues covered in the Bill, it is drainag provision. Although it would have been a neighbourhood plans when applications are permitted—we amendment only provides for a report to be written on those areas where there is an approved neighbourhood plan. The Local Government Association has come out in favour of these two amendments, and it believes that “as a minimum all councils should retain sufficient funds to replace each home sold on a like for like basis” It believes that negotiations between central and local government must allow councils to take into account the impact of wider housing reforms on the responsibilities of councils to meet housing needs. The cross-party Public Accounts Committee, too, has released a damning report on the Government’s plans, and no information has been provided on the impact of the forced sale. This policy will affect many people up and down the country, but the Government have failed to provide basic information to demonstrate how it will achieve its aims.

I will also touch briefly on amendments 97B, 108 and 110. Amendment 97B is a revised amendment to the one we debated last week, proposing a restricted, limited right of appeal in certain specific circumstances only in those areas where there is an approved neighbourhood plan. The amendment would empower local communities to have a greater say over their neighbourhoods, which should be welcomed. The Government’s counter-amendment only provides for a report to be written on neighbourhood plans when applications are permitted—we would already expect that of any good local planning authority.

Amendments 108 and 110 would ensure that all new homes built are carbon-compliant and have sustainable drainage provision. Although it would have been a positive step to see these issues covered in the Bill, it is welcome that the Government have committed to reviewing them. I hope the Minister will be able to provide further details, missing from the amendments themselves, about when these reviews are likely to commence; what a statutory review entails; when these reviews will be completed; and whether their findings will be reported to Parliament.

8.30 pm

The Government were forced to make a string of concessions in the House of Lords and were defeated multiple times, showing the extent of opposition to the Bill. Although there are many things in this Bill we disagree with, I do believe that amendments 10B, 47B and 47C will improve it and will help towards combating the housing crisis, and I hope the Government will consider accepting them.

Nick Herbert: Neighbourhood planning has been one of the success stories of this Government and a flagship of the localism policy. I commend my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the work he did in putting that legislation through and in pioneering neighbourhood plans. They put communities in control and create a situation where they ask themselves what they want in their local areas rather than what they do not want. Neighbourhood plans have ended up producing more housing than was originally intended. As the plans are voted on by a local referendum, it is very important that they are respected once they are agreed. We tell local communities that their neighbourhood plan will apply for, say, 15 years, and that certain areas that they decide will be developed and that others—green spaces and so on—will be protected. It is therefore of concern to local communities that are about to produce a neighbourhood plan or have made one, and to other areas in the process of producing such plans or considering them, if developers appear to be allowed to come along, game the system, bang in a speculative planning application in the hope that they will get it through, arguing that there is some reason why it should be allowed despite a neighbourhood plan, perhaps because of the five-year land supply, and their planning permission is then upheld by the local authority or a planning refusal is overturned on appeal.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): That is exactly the position I face in my constituency, where a number of speculative planning applications are being put forward, often involving the argument that there is not a five-year supply. One case is now having to go to the House of Lords in order to uphold neighbourhood plans, which clearly is not what was intended by the Localism Act 2011 and neighbourhood planning.

Nick Herbert: I understand my hon. Friend’s concern. Indeed, a number of hon. Members are concerned about this issue, as the Minister knows. As I explained in my earlier intervention on him, the intention of the original amendment to introduce a neighbourhood right of appeal was not just to redress a perceived inequity that developers have a right of appeal but communities do not; it was to deal with this particular problem, whereby we cannot allow the whole policy of neighbourhood planning, or the democratic decision, to be undermined in the public eye, given that we accept that a local planning authority does reserve the right to make a strategic allocation. That is understood, but that is a rather different position from suddenly deciding that an area should be developed contrary to a neighbourhood plan.

Mr Jackson: My right hon. Friend is making an impassioned case on behalf of his constituents, but does he not see the other side of gaming? It might be possible for a local planning authority that has not produced a local plan to move a residential development on to the neighbourhood plan scheme and, with a right of appeal that would, over time, stymie the development of much-needed housing.
Nick Herbert: I think my hon. Friend has expressed the Government’s concern about the particular amendment and the proposal for a neighbourhood right of appeal. He has shown why they were not willing to accept it as drafted, and why they rejected it and seek to do so again.

I understand the Government’s concern in this area. I am seeking not to drive a coach and horses through the local planning system or to stymie house building, but to ensure that this very important policy, which is producing more housing than was anticipated and which reflects local needs, is not wrecked because local support for it is undermined. That is certainly in danger of happening in my constituency in West Sussex where neighbourhood planning was going very well, but people are now starting to say, “Well, what are neighbourhood plans worth if they can so easily be overturned?” That is why action in this area is necessary. The Government have taken a step towards it by seeking to insist on an amendment in lieu, which would require local authorities to identify where there was a conflict with the neighbourhood plan. That does not go far enough, because it merely reflects what happens in the planning system at the moment. I welcome the Minister’s willingness to engage with concerned Members on this issue, his understanding of its importance and his commitment to look at it again, perhaps with a view to some future proposals that will ensure that the policy of neighbourhood planning is upheld.

Although I appreciate the reasons why the Government wish to insist on their amendment in lieu for the reasons that my hon. Friend the Minister set out about the specific right of appeal, I do hope that the Government will not dismiss the intention behind the amendment and will honour the commitment that they have made to Members to look again at this important issue. Where we have given local communities a say, we must stand by that commitment, particularly when they have voted democratically. It will damage the policy of neighbourhood planning if we do not. That is why future action, properly constrained in a way that does not stymie planned development, is so important.

Mr Betts: I shall speak to Lords amendment 10B, 47B and 47C.

The Minister is right to say that the Conservatives had a manifesto commitment to build starter homes. Although I may have some disagreements with elements of that policy, I respect it. It is the will of the electorate, and the Government have every right to put it into practice. However, what the Government did not say at the election was that, in large parts of the country, people who could not afford to buy a home would find it virtually impossible to find an affordable home to rent, or that, as a result of their policy, their urgent need will remain, but that the home sold off by the council will be replaced by a property in the slightly better off parts of my constituency; they will be gone completely.

If that is put alongside the Government policy on spending on housing for the remainder of this Parliament, there will be no money for councils or housing associations to bid for to fund affordable rented housing—it will all go on shared ownership and starter homes. There will be no new building as part of the Government’s spending grant availability.

On top of that, as a result of the rules about higher value council homes being sold off, every single vacant property in the slightly better off parts of my constituency is likely to be sold off, so there will be no vacant council properties coming up for rent. The Government have produced no figures whatsoever on how the money that comes in from the sales of those properties will add up to the replacement of the housing association property once the discount has been provided for. Then there is the contribution towards a brownfield remediation pot and a replacement council home. There is no possibility that the home sold off by the council will be replaced by a property that is for affordable rent.

The reality is that in large parts of my constituency, affordable homes for rent will be built through section 106, or through Government grant provision. Affordable homes for rent will be sold off in their totality in some parts of the constituency, with no like-for-like replacement. That adds up to one simple fact: where people are in urgent need of housing for whatever reason, their urgent need will remain, but there will not be an urgent offer of a property, because it will not exist. People in my constituency who have been on the waiting list for 15 years or more will wait not 20 or 25 years, but for ever, because a property will never become available under these policies.

The Bill and other Government measures effectively mean the end of social rented housing in large parts of my constituency, for the simple reason that there will be no social rented housing available to offer people on the waiting list or in urgent need.

Mr Jackson: I shall refer to most of the amendments. I reiterate my concerns about the amendment relating to neighbourhood planning. It would establish a dangerous precedent that would potentially end the neighbourhood right of appeal against conservatories and small-scale extensions. It would very much reduce the speed at which residential development could progress. There would also be an opportunity for sleight of hand by the more unscrupulous planning authorities that do not want any development in their area: they might move residential development on to a neighbourhood planning regime, in lieu of a local structure plan or district plan. With a third-party appeal, that development would be
held up for months and years. People who desperately need homes in high-cost, high-value areas would suffer as a result, so the Government are absolutely right to resist the amendment, although clearly I recognise the sincerity with which my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) represents his constituents’ very legitimate concerns.

Antoinette Sandbach: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Jackson: Not at the moment, if my hon. Friend will allow. I am getting looks of admonishment from the Whips, so I had better proceed. The amendment on the carbon compliance standard is precisely the wrong measure at this time. One of the endemic issues resulting from not delivering the appropriate number of homes is the attrition of small and medium-sized builders. Nothing could be designed to knock out even more of them, or to not allow them back into the market alongside very-sizeable-volume builders, than adding extra cost, so the Government are right to resist that amendment.

I now come to starter homes. This is an issue of social equity and fairness as much as anything else. I made the point when we debated this last week that a significant number of people are accessing finance for their new home through the bank of mum and dad—family money. That cannot be right if we want social fairness and equity. We want new owner-occupied properties to be available to young families in particular, and to working people, who do not have recourse to capital that is passed from generation to generation in a way that is inherently very unfair. Through the vehicle of shared equity and Help to Buy in particular, we are achieving equity and fairness as much as anything else. I made the same arguments about the affordable rent policy that the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) will know, the Labour party understands that other people will benefit by accessing shared equity, affordable rent and starter homes. Some of us put our heads on the block and said that it was probably a good thing, and we were right to do so. I urge Members to support the Government policy and for giving way. On section 106 agreements, one of the big concerns of my constituents is the impact on health and education infrastructure. That needs to be examined in future, particularly in the light of recent judgments by the planning inspectorate, which are being challenged through the courts.

Mr Jackson: I take the hon. Gentleman’s point but local planning authorities like his in Sheffield have not been circumscribed by section 106 in the recent past or at all in developing the tenure that they choose. He will know, because the centre of his city has undergone significant regeneration over many years, that the capacity for section 106 payments to go back into social housing has been an issue in his city and others.

Antoinette Sandbach: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way. On section 106 agreements, one of the big concerns of my constituents is the impact on health and education infrastructure. That needs to be examined in future, particularly in the light of recent judgments by the planning inspectorate, which are being challenged through the courts.

Mr Jackson: I like to think I am an hon. Friend. Some of us remember four or five years ago fighting the battles over the national planning policy framework. Some of us put our heads on the block and said that it was probably a good thing, and we were right to do so. I fear that sometimes discussion of infrastructure is a way of saying, “No residential development in our area.”

There is a housing crisis. Those who hold housing and capital have a duty to release some of it to those who do not have that power and influence. That is a difficult balance. We have to think of quality of life, but that is one of the things that the Bill has addressed. That is why I stand four-square behind the starter homes policy, which has an election mandate, and I urge Members to support the Government policy and to remind the House of Lords politely that only one of our Houses is elected by the people, and that the other can oversee, scrutinise and improve, but not veto.
The Minister speaks about manifesto pledges, and his point is understood, but I would like to quote the press release that accompanied the Tory manifesto launch:

"After funding replacement affordable housing on a one for one basis, the surplus proceeds will be used to fund the extension of right to buy.”

It is entirely untenable for the Government to include starter homes in the definition of affordable housing. A home to buy that requires a deposit of £90,000 and a salary of £77,000 and that costs up to £450,000 is not affordable to most people in London, and my constituents simply shake their heads in disbelief at the suggestion that it is. It is not the case that starter homes are replacement affordable housing, and it is entirely misleading of the Government to claim they are.

Amendment 10B would allow local authorities—the same local authorities that undertake housing needs assessments, that have statutory housing duties, that are democratically accountable to their communities and that know what is needed in their communities—to determine the type of affordable housing that is appropriate in their area.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): My hon. Friend raises the concept of subsidiarity—the organising principle that decisions are best made at the smallest, lowest and least centralised level. Does she agree that the Bill goes nowhere near that concept?

Helen Hayes: The Bill does not simply go nowhere near that principle—it contravenes it.

Amendment 10B would give local authorities the ability to decide the balance of starter homes and other, more genuinely affordable homes to be delivered in their area. By failing to support the amendment, the Government are breaking the commitment they made in launching their manifesto. More importantly, they are failing communities in London and across the country that need affordable housing.

It is important to point out what links an affordable, secure home and the aspiration of many people in this country to own a home: the ability to save. Someone who is spending too high a proportion of their income on private rents and on deposits for landlords every year because they have no security of tenure does not have the ability to save. The Bill does nothing about the private rented sector; it reduces the supply of genuinely affordable homes and, in doing so, it denies the aspiration of an entire generation to have an affordable, secure home and, ultimately, to own a home of their own. That is an ideological position, and it will deepen the housing crisis and be the shame of this Government.

Tom Brake: I want to start by associating myself with the comments made by the hon. Members for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) and for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who is the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee. I hope the Minister will not seek to portray their views, or indeed mine, as those of people who oppose home ownership. Clearly, that is not the case, and I hope the Government will have learned the lesson that fear tactics—certainly in London—do not work very well for them.

On Lords amendment 10B, the Government propose a review. From my brief period as a Minister, I know that when Governments look at what they can offer as a sop to the Opposition, it is a review that comes forward. I welcome the fact that a review is on the table. However, given the impact that zero-carbon homes would have and the positive contribution they would make, that is what we need to stick by. The Minister and other Conservative Members have referred to the Lords intervening in this. Of course, Conservative Members had their opportunity to reform the House of the Lords in the previous Parliament, and failed to do so.

The Minister may also refer to the Conservatives’ manifesto commitment to being the greenest Government ever. I assume that commitment is still in play for them, and hope they would therefore support the idea of zero-carbon homes and the highest possible environmental standards. Last time we discussed this, I asked the Minister how much people would save if these higher standards were introduced. I am afraid that he did not have a response, but he did refer to the fact that people generally keep their homes for seven years. That is another demonstration of a rather short-sighted approach, because these homes will be there not for seven years but for 50 or 100 years—who knows? The zero-carbon measures would have an impact over the duration of the lifetime of these homes—an impact that would benefit all future occupants, not just those who live there for a minimum of seven years.

In relation to extra costs, last time we discussed this, the figure of £3,000 was deployed, although that was disputed. The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead suggested that those costs had gone down to £1,500, and the Minister referred to £15,000; I am not quite sure where he got that from. In any case, long-term savings would clearly be derived from these higher energy standards for homes, and that would benefit everyone who lived in them thereafter.

It is legitimate for the Government to point out that amendment 10B would place additional burdens on smaller builders. It would therefore be appropriate for the Government to come forward with ideas about how to address that through training, advice and additional support from which those builders could benefit so that they could not only develop the sites that we want to be developed but develop homes to the highest possible standards to ensure that the Government meet their climate change commitments.

Question put. That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 10B.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I must inform the House that the motion relates exclusively to England. A double majority is therefore required.

The House having divided: Ayes 289, Noes 206.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England:
Ayes 273, Noes 176.
### Division No. 265

**AYES**

- Adams, Nigel
- Afriyie, Adam
- Al الدوسي, Peter
- Allan, Lucy
- Allen, Heidi
- Amess, Sir David
- Andrew, Stuart
- Ansell, Caroline
- Argar, Edward
- Bacon, Mr Richard
- Baker, Mr Steve
- Baldwin, Harriett
- Barclay, Stephen
- Baron, Mr John
- Barwell, Gavin
- Beb, Guto
- Bellingham, Sir Henry
- Beresford, Sir Paul
- Berry, Jake
- Berry, James
- Bingham, Andrew
- Blackman, Bob
- Blackwood, Nicola
- Blunt, Crispin
- Boles, Nick
- Bone, Mr Peter
- Berwick, Victoria
- Bradley, Karen
- Brady, Mr Graham
- Brazier, Mr Julian
- Bridgen, Andrew
- Brine, Steve
- Brokenhshire, rh James
- Bruce, Fiona
- Buckland, Robert
- Burns, Conor
- Burns, rh Sir Simon
- Burrowes, Mr David
- Burt, rh Alistair
- Cairns, rh Alun
- Carmichael, Neil
- Cartidge, James
- Cash, Sir William
- Caulfield, Maria
- Chalk, Alex
- Chishi, Rehman
- Churchill, Jo
- Clark, rh Greg
- Cleverly, James
- Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
- Coffey, Dr Thérèse
- Collins, Damian
- Colville, Oliver
- Costa, Alberto
- Cox, Mr Geoffrey
- Crabb, rh Stephen
- Davies, Byron
- Davies, David T. C.
- Davies, Glyn
- Davies, Dr James
- Davies, Mims
- Dinenage, Caroline
- Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
- Donelan, Michelle
- Double, Steve
- Dowden, Oliver
- Dowley, Jackie
- Drax, Richard
- Drummond, Mrs Flick
- Duddridge, James
- Duncan, rh Sir Alan
- Dunne, Mr Philip
- Ellis, Michael
- Ellison, Jane
- Ellwood, Mr Tobias
- Elphicke, Charlie
- Eustice, George
- Evans, Graham
- Evans, Mr Nigel
- Evennett, rh Mr David
- Fabricant, Michael
- Fernandes, Suella
- Field, rh Mark
- Foster, Kevin
- Fox, rh Dr Liam
- Francois, rh Mr Mark
- Frazer, Lucy
- Freer, Mike
- Fuller, Richard
- Fysh, Marcus
- Gale, Sir Roger
- Garnier, rh Sir Edward
- Garnier, Mark
- Gauke, Mr David
- Ghani, Nusrat
- Gibb, Mr Nick
- Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
- Glen, John
- Goodwill, Mr Robert
- Gove, rh Michael
- Graham, Richard
- Grant, Mrs Helen
- Green, Chris
- Green, rh Damian
- Greening, rh Justine
- Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
- Griffiths, Andrew
- Guummer, Ben
- Gyimah, Mr Sam
- Halton, rh Robert
- Hall, Luke
- Hammond, Stephen
- Hands, rh Greg
- Harrington, Richard
- Harris, Rebecca
- Hart, Simon
- Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
- Hayes, rh Mr John
- Heappey, James
- Heathon-Harris, Chris
- Heathon-Jones, Peter
- Henderson, Gordon
- Herbert, rh Nick
- Hinds, Damian
- Hollinrake, Kevin
- Hollobone, Mr Philip
- Holloway, rh Mr Adam
- Hopkins, Kris
- Howarth, Sir Gerald
- Howell, John
- Howlett, Ben
- Huddleston, Nigel
- Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
- Jackson, Mr Stewart
- Javid, rh Sajid
- Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
- Jenkin, Mr Bernard
- Jenkyns, Andrea
- Jennick, Robert
- Johnson, Boris
- Johnson, Gareth
- Johnson, Joseph
- Jones, Andrew
- Jones, rh Mr David
- Jones, Mr Marcus
- Kawczynski, Daniel
- Kennedy, Seema
- Kirby, Simon
- Knight, rh Sir Greg
- Knight, Julian
- Kwarteng, Kwasi
- Latham, Pauline
- Leadsom, Andrea
- Lee, Dr Phillip
- Lefroy, Jeremy
- Leigh, Sir Edward
- Leslie, Charlotte
- Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
- Lewis, Brandon
- Lewis, rh Dr Julian
- Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
- Lidington, rh Mr David
- Lilley, rh Mr Peter
- Lopresti, Jack
- Lord, Jonathan
- Loughton, Tim
- Lumley, Karen
- Mackinlay, Craig
- Mackintosh, David
- Main, Mrs Anne
- Mak, Mr Alan
- Malthouse, Kit
- Mann, Scott
- Mathias, Dr Tania
- May, rh Mrs Theresa
- Maynard, Paul
- McCartney, Jason
- McCartney, Karl
- McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
- Menzies, Mark
- Mercer, Johnny
- Merriman, Huw
- Metherel, Stephen
- Miller, rh Mrs Maria
- Milling, Amanda
- Mills, Nigel
- Milton, rh Anne
- Mordaunt, Penny
- Morgan, rh Nicky
- Morris, Anne Marie
- Morris, David
- Morris, James
- Morton, Wendy
- Mowat, David
- Mundell, rh David
- Murray, Mrs Sheryl
- Morrison, Dr Andrew
- Newton, Sarah
- Nokes, Caroline
- Norman, Jesse
- Nuttall, Mr David
- Offord, Dr Matthew
- Opperman, Guy
- Parish, Neil
- Patel, rh Priti
- Pavis, Mark
- Penning, rh Mike
- Penrose, John
- Percy, Andrew
- Perry, Claire
- Phillips, Stephen
- Philp, Chris
- Pickles, rh Sir Eric
- Pincher, Christopher
- Pow, Rebecca
- Prentis, Victoria
- Pursglove, Tom
- Quin, Jeremy
- Quince, Will
- Raab, Mr Dominic
- Redwood, rh John
- Robertson, Mr Laurence
- Robinson, Gavin
- Robinson, Mary
- Rosindell, Andrew
- Rudd, rh Amber
- Rutley, David
- Sandbach, Antoinette
- Scully, Paul
- Seleou, Andrew
- Shannon, Jim
- Shapps, rh Grant
- Sharma, Alok
- Shielbrooke, Alec
- Simpson, David
- Simpson, rh Mr Keith
- Skidmore, Chris
- Smith, Chloe
- Smith, Henry
- Smith, Julian
- Smith, Rhoyston
- Solloway, Amanda
- Souby, rh Anna
- Spencer, Mark
- Stephenson, Andrew
- Stewart, lain
- Stewart, Rory
- Streeter, Mr Gary
- Stride, Mel
- Stuart, Graham
- Sturdy, Julian
- Sunak, Rishi
- Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
- Swire, rh Mr Hugo
- Sym, Mr Robert
- Thomas, Derek
- Throup, Maggie
- Timpson, Edward
- Tothurh, Kelly
- Tomlinson, Justin
- Tomlinson, Michael
- Tracey, Craig
- Tredinnick, David
- Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
- Tugendhat, Tom
- Turner, Mr Andrew
- Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
- Vaizey, Mr Edward
- Var, Mr Shailesh
- Vickers, Martin
- Walker, Mr Charles
- Walker, Mr Robin
- Warman, Matt
- Watson, Dame Angela
- Whatton, Dame Angela
- Wharton, James
- Whately, Helen
- Wheeler, Heather
- White, Chris
- Whittaker, Craig
- Whittingdale, rh Mr John
- Wiggan, Bill
- Williams, Craig
Question accordingly agreed to.
Lords amendment 10B disagreed to.

9.10 pm
More than one hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the Lords message, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, 3 May).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83G).

Clause 72

Reduction of payment by agreement

Motion made, and Question put,

That this House disagrees with Lords amendments 47B and 47C.—[Brandon Lewis.]

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I must remind the House that the motion relates exclusively to England. A double majority is therefore required.

The House having divided: Ayes 291, Noes 203.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England:

Ayes 275, Noes 174.
**Division No. 266]**

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Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy

**Tellers for the Ayes:**

*George Hollingbery and Margot James*

**NOES**

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Anderson, Mr David
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Kevin
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blenkinsop, Tom
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Chapman, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Chewy, rh Ann
Cooker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cox, Jo
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
De Piero, Gloria
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Emore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Farron, Tim
Farron, Tim
Farron, Tim

McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, lan
Milliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morris, Grahame M.
Mulholland, Greg
Murray, lan
Nandy, Lisa
Orn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wright, Mr lain
Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Noes:**

Vicky Foxcroft and Jessica Morden

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

**Lords amendments 47B and 47C disagreed to.**

**After Clause 128**

**Neighbourhood right of appeal**

Resolved,

That this House insists on its amendment 97A in lieu of Lords amendment 97 and disagrees with the Lords in their amendment 97B in lieu of that Lords amendment.—*(Brandon Lewis.)*

**After Clause 143**

**Planning obligations and affordable housing**

Amendment (a) proposed in lieu of Lords amendment 108.

—*(Brandon Lewis.)*

*Question put.* That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 292, Noes 205.

*Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England:*

**Ayes 276, Noes 175.**

**Division No. 267**

[9.24 pm]

**AYES**

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Bacon, Mr Richard

Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel
Tellers for the Ayes:

Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alex
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Rosyton
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tohurston, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warman, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:

Margot James and
George Hollingbery
Question accordingly agreed to.
Amendment (a) made in lieu of Lords amendment 108.
Resolved.
That this House insists on its disagreement with Lords amendment 110 and proposes amendment (a) in lieu.

Lords amendment 109B agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H), That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendments 10B, 47B and 47C and for insisting on Commons amendment 97A and disagreeing to their amendment 97B.

That Andrew Griffiths, Brandon Lewis, Seema Kennedy, Grahame M. Morris, Teresa Pearce and Julian Smith be members of the Committee.

That Brandon Lewis be the Chair of the Committee.

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(Julian Smith.)

Question agreed to.
Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.
Immigration Bill

Consideration of Lords messages

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I inform the House that Lords amendment 87B involves financial privilege.

After Clause 30

Detention etc. by Immigration Officers in Scotland

9.38 pm

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): I beg to move, That this House insists on its disagreement with Lords amendment 84.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Lords amendment 84, and Government amendment (a) in lieu.

Government motion not to insist on amendment 85 in lieu of Lords amendment 85 and to agree to Lords amendment 85C as amended by Government amendments (a) to (f).

Government motion to agree to Lords amendment 87 in lieu of Lords amendment 87 and Government amendments (a) and (b).

Commons amendments 84A and 85B, Government motion not to insist, and amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 84.

James Brokenshire: The Government remain strongly of the view that specifying a maximum time limit for immigration detention would be arbitrary, would not take account of individual circumstances and would encourage individuals to seek to frustrate the removals process until the time limit was reached, so having a negative impact on our ability to enforce immigration controls and maintain public safety. In response to the concerns expressed by a number of Members here and in the other place, we accepted that there should be greater judicial oversight over detention, and we tabled a motion, the effect of which would be that individuals would automatically be referred to the tribunal for a bail hearing six months after their detention began or, if the tribunal had already considered whether to release the person within the first six months, six months after that consideration.

This House approved that motion but, although some peers accepted that the issue of judicial oversight had now been satisfactorily addressed, others remained concerned that six months was too long without that oversight. After careful consideration, we propose again a duty to arrange consideration of bail, but we are now reducing the timing of an automatic bail referral from six to four months. This earlier point of referral reflects the fact that the vast majority of persons are detained for fewer than four months.

Moving on to amendments (a) to (f), the Government have listened carefully to the concerns expressed in this House and the other place on the issue of detaining pregnant women. The motion agreed in the other place would maintain the 72-hour time limit agreed in this House, extendable up to a week with ministerial approval. We have listened carefully to the points raised by the peers who have tabled these amendments. In order further to strengthen the safeguards, we have tabled amendments that will make it clear that pregnant women will be detained for the purpose of removal only if they are shortly to be removed from the UK or if there are exceptional circumstances that justify the detention. The guidance will also make it clear that they should be used in very exceptional circumstances, underlining our expectations in regard to the use of this power.

We have also proposed an amendment that would place an additional duty on officers making detention decisions in respect of pregnant women to have due regard for their welfare. These additional measures, alongside the 72-hour time limit, would act as statutory safeguards to complement the Government’s wider package of reform, which includes the new adults at risk policy, a new gatekeeper function and new safeguarding teams. We also intend to ask Stephen Shaw to carry out a short review to assess progress against the key actions in his previous report.

I turn now to Lords amendment 87. The Government have always been clear about our commitment to identifying and protecting vulnerable refugee children, wherever they are. We wholeheartedly share their lordships’ underlying intentions in this regard. We have a moral duty to help. Our efforts to date, both within and outside Europe, have been designed to do just that. Our commitment to help those in need stands comparison with any other country. The UK has been playing its part in supporting European neighbours to provide support to those who have arrived, by already providing nearly £46 million of funding to the Europe-wide response to help the most vulnerable, including infants and children. This assistance will support vulnerable people including children on the move or stranded in Europe and the Balkans. In addition, the £10 million Department for International Development fund announced on 28 January will support the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Save the Children and the International Rescue Committee to work with host authorities to care for and assist unaccompanied or separated children.

As the Prime Minister made clear last week, we will accept the amendment. However, we have always made it clear that, in implementing it, we must do nothing that would inadvertently create a situation in which more children put their lives at risk by attempting perilous journeys to Europe. That is why only those from Greece, Italy and France who were registered in the EU before 20 March will be eligible for resettlement, when it is in their best interest to come to the UK.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Among the most vulnerable children are the 10,000 who have gone missing. Will the Minister clarify whether those children, who were probably not registered before 20 March, are to be excluded from the provisions he has just outlined?

James Brokenshire: I will come on to the issue of registration, which has been highlighted by a number of people, in a moment. To be clear, we are not seeking to impose an over-burdensome or legalistic requirement on children to prove that they have been formally registered, but we will need to see some evidence that they were
present in Europe before 20 March. This will avoid creating a new and perverse incentive for families to entrust their children to people traffickers. Our focus will be on reunifying children with families in the UK, but we will also consider cases of children at risk of exploitation or abuse.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I understand that the Government are in a difficult position, although I supported the Prime Minister’s original stance on the matter. Are these children not already in safe countries? Are the Minister and the amendment’s supporters suggesting that France, Germany and Greece are not safe?

James Brokenshire: We certainly recognise the pressures that Greece and Italy, for example, have been under, and I will come on to talk about that more specifically. Equally, on children who are looking to be reunited with family here, the measure will provide a further mechanism to support the best interests of the child, which is what the Government have said. Reconnecting children with family here in the UK underpins that important message.

9.45 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I have listened carefully to what the Minister has said and have looked closely at the amendments in lieu that he proposes. Will he be clear to the House about the number? I know that it is not in the amendment in lieu, but is he going to act within the spirit of the 3,000 figure? Will he also give us any indication about what will happen in the short term—perhaps before the new school year starts—and roughly how many children we will support?

James Brokenshire: I recognise the hon. Gentleman’s point, and if he will bear with me I will come on to address it. It is important for the House to recognise that the reference to 3,000 children has been removed from the amendment, but we welcome the insertion of consultation with local authorities, which is important.

An arbitrary quota is not the correct approach. It has no regard to the existing pressures faced by local authorities, which last year alone took charge of 3,000 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who had made their way here. The burdens of taking on children are not evenly shared between local authorities, which is why we have made provision in the Bill to bring about a national dispersal scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. We agree that local authorities should be consulted to ensure that our obligations to those children already in the UK continue to be fulfilled and that any children brought to the UK can be fully supported. The nature of the amendment means that we must consult others before bringing final proposals on implementation.

Furthermore, the best interests of the child must be at the heart of any action. In addition to consulting local authorities, we will also continue to consult relevant non-governmental organisations, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNICEF and other member states, specifically France, Greece and Italy, on how best to implement the legislation, including which children will most benefit from such action and how we can implement procedures and processes that protect the best interests of the child.

Several hon. Members rose—

James Brokenshire: I will give way to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz).

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I warmly welcome what the Minister has said today. The Government have moved a considerable way as a result of what has happened in the other place.

It is so important that we do not send a message out to people traffickers that the floodgates will be open for them to profit more from what is being achieved. It is also important that we give local authorities the resources they need. They are already under huge pressure to house refugees, and it is important that we work with them. The Minister has done the right thing and I welcome it.

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making the point about the messages that we send out and the potential for exploitation by people traffickers. They have become adept at using social media and other techniques to ensnare refugees and children, who then make such journeys and put their lives in traffickers’ hands, with all the horrific consequences that we have seen. He is right to underline that core message.

The conversations have already begun. I was in Athens on Friday for discussions with the Greek Government to explain the nature of the arrangements that we are contemplating. We will now urgently consult others prior to bringing forward more detailed proposals. A meeting with the Local Government Association is scheduled for later this week. Until further discussions have taken place, it is premature to speculate on the likely numbers that will count towards the new obligation set out in the amendment. I hope that my comments show that we are seeking to make progress and to get to a point at which we can report back to the House.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) mentioned funding. Is the Minister prepared to commit to adequately resourcing any new scheme for the resettlement of unaccompanied child refugees, many of whom will be particularly vulnerable? Local authorities in Scotland have already resettled 700 refugees and are pressed for funds at present.

James Brokenshire: Obviously, existing funding is provided for unaccompanied asylum seeking children; the Home Office funds local authorities in that way. We are carefully considering this in the context of the existing arrangements and will be discussing it with colleagues across government, as well as with local authorities. I would like to reassure the House that we intend to be flexible in our interpretation and approach when implementing this amendment, to ensure that it is practical and supports the most vulnerable children, as intended. We believe the amendment, as currently drafted, enables us to do that. The use of the term “refugee” can be interpreted to include certain asylum seekers and
avoid the requirement of a child having to go through a full refugee determination process before being admitted to the UK. Our Syrian resettlement scheme already operates in a not dissimilar way, and we do not believe any clarifications are necessary.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Does the Minister accept, however, that vulnerability does not necessarily end on a child’s 18th birthday? We have already deported about 3,000 children to a number of countries, including Libya and Syria, since 2005. Will he assure us that the children who are allowed in will be allowed to stay here?

James Brokenshire: I do not want to conflate, as the right hon. Gentleman seems to be doing, those who claim asylum in this country and are then determined not to have a valid asylum claim—we would therefore seek to remove them on their 18th birthday—with the arrangements we are contemplating and which I am setting out to the House this evening. Obviously, we are looking carefully at the nature of the leave that will be granted. It is important to understand and recognise that where we are seeking to reunite children with parents here, the Dublin arrangements would normally mean that they would have the same leave as the person who was here. Equally, if we are looking at resettlement, different leaves may be involved. We are looking at this carefully with UNHCR and others.

I hope that colleagues will agree that accepting the amendment is the right thing to do. No country has done more than Britain when it comes to help for Syrian refugees. Accepting this amendment demonstrates the Government’s approach of doing more for refugee children across the globe while upholding the principle that we should not be encouraging vulnerable people to make that perilous journey. We remain of the view that we can have the biggest impact by supporting refugees in affected regions and the countries hosting them. Those we resettle here are the exceptions and the vulnerable whom the UNHCR advise need to be resettled in a country such as the UK. That has always been the cornerstone of our policy and that should remain the case, but we recognise our duties, both in the EU and beyond.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Let me start by discussing unaccompanied refugee children in Europe and reminding the House that two weeks ago the Government voted against the Lord Alf Dubs amendment, as it was then put in the other place, which was a change from the position the last time we saw it in this House. I welcome this change of position, which is a step in the right direction, but I wish to pay tribute to those who have got us this far. I pay particular tribute to Lord Alf Dubs and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), who has raised this matter on so many occasions, both in this House and elsewhere. I also thank Save the Children and the other charities and non-governmental organisations that have given their support. I pay tribute to those on the Conservative Benches who have urged the Government to reconsider their position. They have done so over several weeks and months and played an important part in getting us to where we are today.

It is important that actions match words. Citizens UK has identified 157 children in Calais with family connections here. Obviously, there are many children in equally appalling conditions in Greece and Italy. Although the Minister does not want to put numbers and a timetable to the proposed change to the resettlement scheme, the challenge for the Government is surely to take all those in Calais with valid legal claims for reunification notwithstanding the fact that they are in France—

Sir Gerald Howarth: Reunification in France?

Keir Starmer: Reunification with their family here under the Dublin arrangements. The Minister has made it clear on a number of occasions that he is seeking to improve the reunification rules under the Dublin arrangements. Some 157 children have been identified as falling into that category. This is the time for action, not words. We also challenge the Government to take 300 children most at risk in Greece and Italy before the start of the next school term. There is an urgency to this situation. The debate two weeks ago was dominated by a real and genuine concern about the missing children—those who are at risk of exploitation, trafficking and various other aspects of mischief. That is the challenge. I ask the Minister to say a little more to the House about the numbers and the timetable.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I also pay tribute to the Government for the immense amount they have done to help displaced Syrian refugees. Will the hon. and learned Gentleman also take on board the huge pressures that are already on children in care in this country? Some 70,000 children in England are in care, and there is a shortage of 10,000 foster carers. It is really vital that we are able to offer safekeeping to those children who are coming here and to do it sustainably and not to the detriment of the other children to whom we already have a responsibility.

Keir Starmer: I agree that if children are to come to this country under the proposal put forward in this amendment, it must be done properly with the relevant local authorities receiving full support.

I also supported the amendment that sought to enable movement and help to pass from one local authority to another. Kent, in particular, has provided a lot of
support. Although there has been voluntary support from other local authorities, the amendment proposed by the Government during the passage of the Bill put in place a provision to allow that to be more meaningful and effective, and I supported that for the very reasons that have been mentioned in this House.

I want to move on to immigration detention, because there are two substantive issues still before—

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Keir Starmer: On immigration detention? I have barely started. I really think that I should press on, as we have limited time.

On immigration detention, the Stephen Shaw report made it clear that there is now near universal acceptance that detention makes people more vulnerable, and disquiet has been growing. Lords amendment 84 tackles that issue head on, by sensibly providing a 28-day period of immigration detention after which the Secretary of State can apply to extend detention in exceptional circumstances. That amendment strikes the right balance and reflects both the cross-party reports by the all-party groups on refugees and on migration and long-standing Labour party policy. It also had cross-party support in the Lords. Amendment 84A in lieu provides for four months of immigration detention, with an ability to apply for bail at the end of that exercise. That is markedly different: it is four months rather than 28 days; it puts the onus on the individual rather than on the Secretary of State; and it is subject to a different test. It does not go far enough, which is why we will vote in favour of the Lords amendment this evening.

Let me move on to the position of pregnant women. I remind the House of an important finding of Stephen Shaw’s report. As he put it, it is “obvious” that detention has harmful effects on both the mother and the unborn child. The Royal College of Midwives, in its evidence to him for his report, pointed to the special vulnerabilities of pregnant women and made it clear that appropriate care cannot be given in detention. Add to that the fact that until now, the vast majority of pregnant women have not been removed, and one can see why he concluded that the current policy was not working. He rightly concluded that the only move should be to absolute prohibition. That has been the Labour party position consistently, and that is why we voted as we did on 25 April.

10 pm

I recognise that the Government have moved on this issue to a position of not allowing detention beyond 72 hours, or up to a week with the Secretary of State’s approval. That does not go far enough, but it is better than no limit. The amendment that was eventually accepted in the Lords reflected that concession and introduced other important safeguards. It is worth setting out those safeguards for the House. The first is the overriding principle that pregnant women should be detained only in the most exceptional circumstances. The second is that detention must be at a place where there are facilities for appropriate medical care. The third is that there should be provision for an independent family return panel. That is the amendment that the Lords have put back before the House tonight: a limit of 72 hours, or up to a week with the Secretary of State’s approval; the overriding principle of detention in only the most exceptional circumstances; appropriate medical facilities; and the involvement of an independent family return panel.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that we should move to not detaining vulnerable people at all? It is expensive and immoral. In this amendment, we see some movement on that, because after all, we consider pregnant women to be vulnerable, but given that two thirds of the women in places such as Yarl’s Wood are victims of sexual violence in conflict, we really should not detain any of them at all.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. On vulnerable individuals as described, I agree. I state again that our position, particularly in relation to pregnant women, is that they should not be in immigration detention at all. However, this is a move in the right direction by the Government, and the limit proposed is better than no limit at all.

Unfortunately, the amendment in lieu undoes a lot of the good work, because it seeks to remove the overriding principle that there should be detention only in the most exceptional circumstances, and seems to remove the provision relating to medical facilities. For those reasons, we will not support the amendment in lieu, but will support the Lords amendment.

Sir Gerald Howarth: I quite understand the difficulty that the Government face. As I am sure that my hon. Friends will agree, the British Government have done more than any other Government apart from that of the United States of America to help those fleeing the torment in Syria and other parts of the middle east. I warmly welcome that part of the Department for International Development budget; that is a good use of its budget, though I may disagree with other parts of it. I accept that the Government face some opposition from Conservative Members, but the Government’s original policy was absolutely right. The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), representing the new champions of the premier league—he is not wearing his scarf today; clearly he has deserted his—[Interruption.] Ah! The scarf is under there! He said that he hoped that the amendment would not exacerbate the pull factor, but I am afraid that all reasonable opinion in this country will conclude that it will do precisely that. If we agree to this amendment, we are sending out the message that Britain is a soft touch. Also, it is a cruel policy, as I have said to the Aldershot News & Mail—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) is being facetious about the Aldershot News & Mail; it is a very important organ of communication.

The policy is cruel because it will encourage desperate, tragic parents to send their children across the inhospitable seas of the Mediterranean in search of a better life. Who can blame them for wanting to do that? However, they are parents, and their responsibility is to their children. It is not our first responsibility; it is that of the parents, and they will be encouraged by this measure to send their children across that dangerous sea and put
them at risk in the hope that they will be able to get not just to other safe countries—France, Greece or Italy—but to the United Kingdom.

If this House is saying, in the middle of a debate on whether Britain should remain a member of the EU, that—/[ Interruption. ] Members on the Opposition Benches should not sneer. If this House is saying that Italy, France and Greece are not safe countries, why on earth are we members of that organisation?

Anne McLaughlin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Gerald Howarth: If the Scottish National party would like to intervene, of course I accept that intervention, but if the SNP feels so strongly about this, it should not ask the British Government for money. Put up your own money to cover the costs.

Anne McLaughlin: Does the hon. Gentleman understand that in Calais tonight there are children sleeping in containers that sleep 12 people? They are sleeping alongside adults, strangers to them, and there is nobody supervising. Does he think that is safe?

Sir Gerald Howarth: The whole point is that they are in safe countries. The criticism should be levelled not at the British Government, but at other Governments. If the Scottish nationalists wish to take the children in and they have the capacity in Scotland, they should pay for it themselves and not ask the Minister to go to the British Treasury to fund it. Put your money where your mouth is.

I fear that the Lords amendment will send out a very dangerous message. It is also an insulting message to our continental partners, whom we all know, because we see it night after night on our television screens, are wrestling with the consequences of this tragic migration flow into Europe. The Lords amendment sends out a damning message to them that they cannot cope and that their conditions are inadequate to look after vulnerable people.

That is my first point. My second point is this: my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) rightly asked the sanctimonious hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), who is parading his compassion—/[ Interruption. ] We have free speech in this country. My hon. Friend made the point that there is a shortage of 10,000 foster carers in our country to look after our own children in need of foster care.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Gerald Howarth: No, I will not. The hon. Gentleman does not spend enough time in this Chamber for me to give way to him.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham is right that there is already a demand to look after our own children. As I have told the Prime Minister, in my constituency we do not have the capacity to take any more people and I will not give priority to those from overseas, however tragic, when my own constituents are suffering homelessness and vulnerable children cannot be catered for.

I quite understand the difficult position that my right hon. Friend the Minister has been put in, I suspect by some of my hon. Friend who have felt it necessary to parade their compassion. I do not believe the amendment to be a compassionate move. It sends out a very dangerous signal, encouraging parents to dispose of their children and put them at risk on the high seas, which is deeply dangerous.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Along with many others, we in the SNP have been arguing for months that the UK should take a fair share of refugees and asylum seekers from Europe in the face of the ongoing humanitarian crisis. We are therefore glad that the Government have now apparently accepted that principle, albeit up to a point. They have finally listened to the arguments from the different parties and from a host of campaign groups and charities, and we cautiously welcome that change of heart.

Indeed, last week, in Westminster Hall, the Minister himself made a persuasive case for a fairer distribution of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. That was in the context of a debate on children already in the UK and was a call for solidarity with the citizens of Kent, where many unaccompanied children have arrived. We on these Benches support that call for responsibility to be shared across the UK, but we want the same logic applied on a European level.

Like others across the House, we will monitor progress carefully to ensure that the new policy is implemented in the spirit of the amendment from Lord Dubs. For example, it is vital, as others have said, that the cut-off date does not rule out protection for the many children who have been in Europe since before that date but who have never been registered, and I welcome the reassurances the Minister has given this evening. Equally, as others have said, the support offered to local authorities must be sufficient to allow them to feel able to become involved in the new programme, so that the numbers taken on represent a genuine attempt to play our part. We will also look for the Scottish Government to be closely involved in overseeing the necessary processes in Scotland and for the Scottish Guardianship Service to have the support it needs to play its part.

However, as the Opposition spokesperson said—this is probably most important of all—it is essential that action is fast. As all hon. Members who have visited camps across Europe will know, the conditions these children are living in are horrendous. We need the Immigration Minister back in the House to update us within weeks, rather than months.

If implemented properly and generously, the Government’s decision will be looked back on warmly and, indeed, even as a matter of pride—people will only wonder, “Why the delay?” However, there is a long way to go before we reach that point.

On the remaining, unresolved issues, the Government have come up short again. On amendment 84, their lordships are absolutely right to insist on a general rule that immigration detention should not last longer than 28 days. This is a modest amendment; as I said when the Bill was last here, it moves us towards a time limit, rather than creating an absolute limit, because of various exceptions. However, their lordships’ reasoning for insisting on the amendment is absolutely right, because the
Government’s alternative is even further from being a proper time limit on immigration detention—it simply adds an automatic bail hearing after four months.

Every now and then, we have hints from the Government that they are waking up to the fact that policy and practice on immigration detention in the UK is draconian, unnecessary and expensive. There are occasional suggestions of a change in approach, but proposed reform is simply far too slow. Far from representing a brave new policy dawn, what the Government are asking us to put into legislation barely even reflects what is supposed to already be their policy—a presumption in favour of temporary admission or release and the use, wherever possible, of alternatives to detention.

In short, the right to liberty continues to be badly undermined—all for the administrative convenience of the Home Office. The Government have failed each time to explain why, in contrast to every single other EU country, the UK cannot operate within the confines of a proper time limit. We will continue to support the Lords amendment as a step in the right direction.

On amendment 85C, we are perhaps getting closer to a result we can live with. My colleagues and I continue to believe that the Government should implement in full Stephen Shaw’s recommendation of an absolute prohibition on the detention of pregnant women. Such a policy would not put immigration control in peril; it would ensure that some pretty barbaric practices in UK detention facilities are brought to an end.

It is frustrating that we are still having this debate without the full facts at our disposal. When will the Minister tell us exactly how many pregnant women are detained, how long they are detained, whether they were released and whether they were removed? What information we do have does not impress. For example, we know that 90 out of 99 pregnant women detained in Yarl’s Wood in 2014 were eventually released back into the community.

Lords amendment 85C does incorporate the 72 hours or one-week limit suggested by the Government, but it also contains alternative protections. Its inclusion of a general principle against the detention of pregnant women mirrors provisions on the detention of children in families set out in the Immigration Act 2014. As well as retaining that overriding principle, it sets standards for accommodation, for providing notice and for shorter journey times. If we have to compromise on our belief that there should be an absolute ban, then we are absolutely determined to see the full range of protections retained within the Bill. We cannot support what the Government propose in terms of amending amendment 85C and thereby water down many of those protections.

We will not support dawn raids on pregnant women, long journeys to detention centres, or inadequate facilities at those centres. If there is not to be the absolute ban recommended by Sir Stephen Shaw, then we must have the safeguards that prioritise antenatal care over Home Office convenience. The Government have their priorities absolutely wrong.

Amid all the gloom of this Bill, at least let us properly safeguard the right to liberty, and at least take action to properly protect pregnant women. That really is not very much to ask.
The Government's commitment on asylum-seeking children who come within the current family reunion scheme is aligned to the Lords amendment that will now have the force of law. That will lead to accountability and publication of statistics on how many children have been relocated and where they have been accommodated—settlements that must be dispersed much more fairly across the United Kingdom. We will thus be able to hold the Government to account on their commitment.

Heidi Allen: On that point about the language around registered children—I, too, welcome the Minister's response to that—I am interested in my hon. Friend's views on how we can work with NGOs to identify the children who were in Europe before the Turkey deal, because a lot of them will not be in the system.

Mr Burrowes: It has been somewhat lost in the debate, but we should welcome the Government's commitment to dispatching 45 experts to Greece to provide processing and registration. That does not make the campaign headlines, but it is of vital practical importance now. We are not turning back; we want to get the experts out to Greece now to improve the reception that some months ago, as my hon. Friend and her colleagues saw, was woeful. We will now be able to process those people and provide them with safety. Some of them will, no doubt, be able to come to this country in the scheme that the Government have announced, but others will be relocated to providers of children's services across Europe, because there are existing legal commitments to children.

I welcome the Government's commitments. I welcome the fact that the commitment made last week will, as I understand it, be aligned with the Lords amendment and will include asylum-seeking children, those who seek family reunification and children who are at risk of exploitation. We should not forget the Government's world-leading commitment to relocate from the Syrian and north African region children who are at risk. Just as we have campaigned for safe and legal routes, we must now encourage other countries to step up and join us in the scheme for children at risk. We are leading other countries in providing the international aid that will bring people to safety. Some of them saw, was woeful. We will now be able to process those people and provide them with safety. Some of them will, no doubt, be able to come to this country in the scheme that the Government have announced, but others will be relocated to providers of children's services across Europe, because there are existing legal commitments to children.

I welcome the Government's commitment to provide an automatic bail hearing. When the hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips) and I were in Athens last week, we went to a makeshift camp in a hockey stadium, where 1,200 people are staying in rigged-up tents and under blankets. In among them were children and teenagers with no one to look after them. The aid workers talked about the abuse, the risk of domestic violence and the cases of rape that there have been. Children need to be supported. We also met Greek Government Ministers—probably the same ones that the Minister for Immigration met last Friday—who said that they want help, particularly to resettle children quickly because they are at risk and are out of school.

By agreeing to Lords amendment 87B, we will be saying that we are prepared to do our bit. However, I urge the Minister for Immigration to move swiftly on the practicalities. I welcome the steps he has set out, but I urge him not simply to go along with the original
objective of the Dubs amendment, which was to help
3,000 children—I hope he will still aim to achieve that
by providing support for 3,000 child refugees—but to
set a milestone by accepting the proposal put forward
by UNICEF, Citizens UK and the group of bishops to
help all those currently stuck in limbo in the family
reunification system. In particular, we should help the
nearly 150 children in Calais and the first 300 children
from Italy and Greece to do our bit to speed up the
process as rapidly as possible so that we can get them in
place and resettled by the beginning of the school year.
Some of those children have been out of school for far
too long already, and we should do our bit to help. Of
course, that will mean giving support to local authorities
to enable them to do so.

Stella Creasy: My right hon. Friend is making an
incredibly powerful speech. She is right to say that this
amendment is supported not just by Conservative Members,
but by people across the country who think we should
help such child refugees. Indeed, people in my own
community were so inspired by her work and that of
Lord Dubs that they raised over £1,000 in five days to
pay for caravans for children to stay in in refugee camps
in Calais while waiting to be resettled in this country.
There is clearly support for this across the country. It is
right that we look at the 3,000 figure as a milestone, but
I hope she agrees that we can do a lot more.

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend that there
is a lot of support and interest in this amendment, and
we should be drawing on that. The Government have
talked about working with the LGA, but I hope that
they will also work with all sorts of other organisations.
For example, I had an email only this morning from an
independent boarding school local to my constituency
that wants to offer two free places from September for
child refugees. I will pass that offer on to Ministers, who
I hope will take up not only that offer, but those of
about 80 places from independent boarding schools
across the country, as well as others from other community
groups and organisations that want to do their bit to
help—from faith groups to Home for Good, which
wants to work with the Government to bring forward
more places—

Sir Gerald Howarth rose—

Yvette Cooper: I will not give way because there is
very little time and other Members want to speak.
Home for Good wants to involve foster parents who
would be prepared to sign up and work with local
authorities.

Kelly Tolhurst: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Yvette Cooper: I will give way to the hon. Lady, who
has not yet spoken.

Kelly Tolhurst: Will the right hon. Lady outline the
conversations she has had with her local authority
about the number that it is prepared to take? When
Kent was in crisis last year and we asked other authorities
for help, very few came forward. My question is: how
many, and what has changed?
My second point is that we must make absolutely sure that we avoid the pull. I know some Members are sceptical about that, but from my conversations with young men in Calais I am convinced that there is a pull factor, particularly for older teenagers—16, 17 and 18-year-olds. We must not encourage people smugglers to be paid to bring more of those people across Europe, so we must do this in a way that avoids a pull—as is, quite rightly, the plan.

My third and final point is we must make sure that we do it well. The Government are absolutely right to carry this out in consultation with local authorities. I represent a Kent constituency that is managing over 1,000 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and care leavers. It is a huge burden, and very few other local authorities have stepped up to help. I sincerely hope that more local authorities will now take on their fair share. As part of that, let us make sure that we make use of the upsurge in interest in fostering—many people have put forward their names to be foster carers—not only to look after unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and refugees but to provide more homes for British children who are in care.

Tim Farron: Seven months ago I used my first Prime Minister’s question as party leader to call on the Prime Minister to give sanctuary to 3,000 unaccompanied refugee children. The campaign has been cross-party and cross-community. Today we celebrate in particular the work of Lord Alf Dubs in pushing his amendment and equal doggedness have brought the Government to the brink of this change.

We should understand, however, that although we are finally able to give hope to some of these children and although this is a victory, it is certainly not the end of the story. Even tonight we are hearing from No. 10 that the Government will not take a single one of the refugees for another seven months, will not help children who arrive after the arbitrary date and will not commit to a fixed number.

Fiona Mactaggart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Farron: I do not have time, sorry.

In January, the Government claimed to be supporting child refugees, and we became optimistic, but then it turned out that that was just a repackaging of existing funds to the region. Last month, the Government said that they would take 3,000 children, and we were ready to cheer, but it turned out that none would be the desperate children alone in the camps in Europe. Last week, on the eve of elections, the Government gave way and said that they would accept the Dubs amendment, but now we discover that although they may have accepted the letter of the amendment they continue to flout its spirit.

With depressing predictability, we again see that the Government view desperate refugees as a media and political management issue, and not as the greatest, cruellest humanitarian disaster to face our continent in 71 years. Better late than never comes to mind, but remember this: in the seven months since we first raised this matter, it is likely that hundreds, if not thousands, of vulnerable children will have joined the 10,000 who have gone missing, into the hands of people trafficers, into forced labour and into child sexual exploitation. It keeps me awake at night that some of the children I met in Lesbos, in northern Greece and in Calais will now, I know, have shared that desperate fate, because of the Government’s prevarication. Now, the clock is ticking. Every week that we delay taking these children, more will disappear into the hands of those who wish to exploit them. The Minister has the blueprint that we produced, together with the help of local authorities of all parties, Save the Children, fostering agencies, and Home for Good. He will see that with sufficient leadership and Government resources, we could take these children pretty much straightaway.

Throughout this ongoing debate, all that has hindered us from doing the right thing as a country is the lack of political will from this Government. Last month, I saw in northern Greece a razor-wire fence on the Macedonian side of the border. It was backed up with tanks every 50 yards, and it was built in 36 hours because when politicians want to do something quickly, they can. This Government could act quickly if only they had the political will.

I do not care whether this counts as a U-turn. As a result of this campaign, many of us know that hundreds, hopefully thousands of children will be granted sanctuary. That is a welcome change of position, but it is clearly not a change of heart. Taking these children is not the best that we can do as a country; it is the least that we can do as a country.

Kelly Tolhurst: I am actually quite sad tonight given what I have heard, because there is a clear sense and determination among Labour Members to suggest that the Government have not been doing enough. I spoke to the amendment two weeks ago, and the county of Kent has been rehoming unaccompanied minors and refugees for decades. Kent has been a gateway for people making their way to safety into this country, and this Government, and previous Governments, have been doing their bit.

As I have outlined previously, it is all very well making a simplistic argument—“We’ll just put these young people with foster carers”—but the reality is, as my hon. Friends have said, that we have a shortage of foster carers in this country. What I have found saddest about this whole debate in the weeks leading up to it has been that, week after week, Opposition Members have stood up and spoken about unaccompanied minors. I do not know about them, but I do a hell of a lot of work with looked-after children, and since I have been elected to this House I have not heard Opposition Members stand up and champion the outcomes of young looked-after children in this country. Labour Members have stood up and talked about unaccompanied minors, but they have not made that point.

I have spoken to friends on the continent over this past week, and as has been said, they feel quite depressed about the debates that we have had in this House, the accusations that have been levelled at some countries on the continent, and the fear that this is unsafe. This Government and country are doing enough.
The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83G).

That this House does not insist on its amendment 85B in lieu.

Motion made, and Question put, That this House insists on its disagreement to Lords amendment 85.

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83G).

That this House does not insist on its amendment 85A in lieu, but proposes amendment (a) in lieu.

Question agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker then put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83G).

After Clause 31

Motion made, and Question put, That this House does not insist on its amendment 85B in lieu.

The House divided: Ayes 296, Noes 258.

Division No. 268 [10.39 pm]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brooks, Sir James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, Dr Sir Simon
Burt, Dr Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James

Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hallon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Hands, rh Greg
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Hudson, rh Sir Alan
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan

Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merrimam, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morriss, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Morrison, Dr Andrew
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Perry, Andrew
Philp, Claire
Philip, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pickle, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Pugsley, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Roberson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alex
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrer, rh Mr Andrew
Vaiyey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warman, Matt
Waterston, Dame Angela
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Wollastone, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
George Hollingbery and
Simon Kirby

Farnell, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiello, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Fuller, Richard
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Glinond, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynee, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Heron, Lady
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, rh Angus
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justis
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Calum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGarry, Natalie
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
McMahon, Jim
Meale, Sir Alan
Mears, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morris, Grahame M.
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Roberts, rh Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, rh Joan
Salmond, rh Alex
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, rh Dr Lisa
Smith, Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 87B in lieu of Lords amendment 87 agreed to, with Commons financial privilege waived in respect of Lords amendment 87B.

Business without Debate

NOTICES OF QUESTIONS

Ordered.

That, in respect of Questions to the Secretary of State for Wales for oral answer on Wednesday 25 May in the next Session of Parliament, paragraph (5)(a) of Standing Order No. 22 (Notices of Questions, Motions and Amendments) shall apply with the substitution of three days for four days.—[Jackie Doyle-Price.]

PETITIONS

Community Pharmacies

10.51 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I wish to deliver this petition of the residents of Scunthorpe to the House of Commons. The petition states:

The petition of residents of Scunthorpe,

Declares that local pharmacies are a vital frontline health service, forming part of the fabric of health communities across England; further that they may be forced to close as a result of Government proposals; further that this could deprive people of accessible medicines advice and other valuable support from trusted professionals; and further that it may also put more pressure on GPs and hospital services.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department of Health to reassess their proposed plans and protect local pharmacies.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Wellington Railway Station

10.53 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The petition relates to a railway station for Wellington and has 402 signatures. The petition declares that “a new railway station in Wellington in the constituency of Taunton Deane should be opened”.

Following is the full text of the petition:

The petition of residents of Taunton Deane, Declares that a new railway station in Wellington in the constituency of Taunton Deane should be opened; further that this project has a local support from residents and businesses; further that the rapidly expanding town is experiencing high volumes of road congestion and that a rail link could help alleviate this and improve local air quality whilst at the same time improving rural transport networks in the area; and further that Taunton Deane Borough Council have committed £40,000 to a feasibility study and pending commitment from the other involved partners we seek the support of the Department of Transport through the New Station Fund.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Transport to open a new metro style railway station in Wellington and support the feasibility study.

And the petitioners remain, etc.}
Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I am most grateful to Mr Speaker for giving me the opportunity this evening to raise the issue of the UK’s membership of the European convention on human rights. I want to focus on the issue in the context of the referendum that will take place on 23 June—and let me say, as a Brexiteer, that it is good to know that a fellow Brexiteer will be responding to the debate.

I should, at the outset, set out my position on sovereignty and human rights. I want our Parliament to make the laws to which United Kingdom citizens are subject, and I want our independent judges to interpret those laws without fear or favour. I believe that if Parliament does not like a court’s interpretation of the law, Parliament should be able to change that law, prospectively but not retrospectively. I also believe that supranational courts should not be able to legislate for us by judicial means. If the wording of a treaty is to be changed, it should be changed by an amending protocol and not by judges.

That is why I support the European convention on human rights, but am very uneasy about the way in which it has been extended by judicial activism into fields that Parliament has never approved—a prime example, obviously, is giving votes to prisoners, an issue which the Prime Minister told us made him feel physically sick—and that is why I am so keen for the United Kingdom to take back control over the making and interpretation of our laws. Currently, 60% of our laws are made by the European Union, and they can be changed at will by the European Union against our wishes, because even if all United Kingdom Members of the European Parliament vote in one way, they can muster fewer than 10% of the votes in that Parliament.

I applied for this debate because I am very confused about Government policy on UK membership of the European convention on human rights. I read the speech delivered by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to the Institution of Mechanical Engineers on 25 April, entitled “The United Kingdom, the European Union, and our place in the world”. In that speech, my right hon. Friend set out what she considered to be the principles for Britain’s membership of international institutions. She said:

“We need…to establish clear principles…Does it make us more influential beyond our…shores? Does it make us more secure? Does it make us more prosperous? Can we control or influence the direction of the organisation in question? To what extent does membership bind the hands of Parliament?”

Having asked all those questions, she said that

“the case for remaining a signatory of the European Convention on Human Rights—which means Britain is subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights—is not clear.”

She went on to say:

“The ECHR can bind the hands of Parliament, adds nothing to our prosperity, makes us less secure by preventing the deportation of dangerous foreign criminals.

“If we want to reform human rights laws in this country, it isn’t the EU we should leave but the ECHR and the jurisdiction of its court.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): If we want to have influence, we should bear in mind that tomorrow is the eighth anniversary of the imprisonment of seven Bahá’í leaders in Iran. They are prisoners of conscience, and were imprisoned as a result of their religious belief. That is an unquestionable violation of their human rights.

Outside Europe, the United Kingdom’s membership of the European convention on human rights sends a strong signal of our continued commitment to upholding and advancing human rights globally. Is there not a good reason for our being a member of the convention when we can do something for those Bahá’í leaders in Iran who have been violated and persecuted because of their beliefs? That is one example.

Mr Chope: The hon. Gentleman has made his point very well. However, I am concentrating on what the Home Secretary said. She seemed to be announcing a Government policy that the United Kingdom should leave the convention but stay in the EU. Her speech led to an urgent question, which was granted by Mr Speaker, and I—and other people who were present on that occasion—could not understand how we were going to be able to deliver the Home Secretary’s agenda on human rights if we remained in the European Union and subject to the EU charter of fundamental rights.

Questions were raised by Members during those exchanges, and it became clear that the Home Secretary—and, indeed, the Government—were indeed rather confused about this. One of the questions that was asked was whether membership of the European Union required us to be a party to the European convention on human rights. The Home Secretary was not answering the urgent question. The Attorney General answered, as a Law Officer. He said:

“It is not in any way clear that membership of the European Union requires membership of the European convention on human rights…there are considerable legal complexities.”—[Official Report, 26 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 1291.]

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) then cited article 6.3 of the treaty on European Union, which states:

“Fundamental rights, as guaranteed by the European Convention…shall constitute general principles of the Union’s law.”

He went on to refer to the fact that the Commission had said that any member country of the European Union that sought to disengage from the European convention on human rights might have its voting rights suspended.

Then, as so often happens in this House, my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) asked a really pertinent question. He said:

“Can a country remain in the European Union and still come out of the convention? What is his legal opinion on that?”

The Attorney General replied:

“As I have suggested, the legal position is not clear.”

He went on to say that he did not “have the time to go into all the ins and outs of that particular question now, but I suggest it would also be wrong to say that it is clear in the opposite direction.”—[Official Report, 26 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 1301.]

So that was what the Government were saying about this particular matter.
This morning, I heard the Prime Minister chiding Brexiteers for having no clear comprehensive plan for life outside the EU, but that was a classic case of the pot calling the kettle black. As I have just said, the Prime Minister and the Government have no clear plan for life inside the European Union if there is a remain vote on 23 June. They do not know what will happen to their human rights agenda. There are many other examples beyond that.

It is a failure by the Government not to address this issue up front, and to leave it hanging in the air pending the referendum. We have had some quite clear advice from lawyers of great distinction. For example, Lord Woolf said:

“You can legally reconcile the doctrine of the sovereignty of Parliament with the European Convention on Human Rights. You cannot do that with regard to the European Charter, because the position there is that you can trump a statute.”

Lord Woolf was being quoted there in the House of Lords paper 139, which was published today. We now have a situation in which the Home Secretary seems to be arguing that we would be more secure if we left the convention on human rights but retained European law relating to fundamental rights.

I should like to give the House some examples of how EU law is undermining our security. In The Sunday Telegraph yesterday, it was reported that six Algerian terror suspects with links to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda were to be allowed to stay here after a 10-year battle in the courts. I think that the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab) has made the point that the number of people fraudulently trying to gain entry into the United Kingdom has almost doubled in a year. That is because those people realise that we do not have the power to turn them away at our borders if they are waving a European Union identity document.

I was speaking at a conference on European freight security last week, at which it became apparent that we are not allowed to X-ray lorries in Calais to see whether they contain illegal migrants because it might be damaging to the human rights and health of those illegal migrants. That is another example of how human rights laws undermine our ability to keep our borders secure. Another example is that we are not allowed to take DNA samples from migrants who refuse to give their fingerprints when they enter the European Union, which is expressly prohibited by the Eurodac regulations.

Then we have the example, which came out a couple of months ago, of Abu Hamza’s daughter-in-law. We found out that she was his daughter-in-law only through a freedom of information request. An advocate-general in the European Court of Justice said that it was in principle contrary to European Union treaties to remove the lady from the United Kingdom, notwithstanding the fact that she had been convicted and sentenced to a year’s imprisonment. It was subsequently revealed that she had been convicted of attempting to smuggle a Sim card to Abu Hamza while he was in a high-security prison, but even that grave crime was insufficient to allow the courts to remove her from the United Kingdom because of the intervention of the European Court of Justice, which exercised its powers under the EU’s fundamental rights laws.

I cannot understand how the Home Secretary can consistently argue that we should stay in the European Union when the logic of everything she said in her speech was that we should be leaving the EU. It is potentially misleading for members of the public to think that they can have their cake and eat it by leaving the European convention on human rights while still remaining subject to the European Court of Justice.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Perhaps all these complexities explain why so little progress is being made on our manifesto commitment to leave the European convention on human rights. When the Minister replies, I hope that he will make it clear that the Government have not gone cold on that.

Mr Chope: I hope that the Minister will be able to respond to that. We had a debate towards the beginning of this parliamentary Session in which the Minister said he could not bring a consultation document on this sooner rather than later. I think he envisaged that that would be before Christmas, but it then became after Christmas and now it is after the referendum. They were talking about a consultation document, so why can we not have even a discussion? I fear that it has been kicked into the long grass on the instructions of No. 10, because it was realised that it would lead to a lot of awkward questions. The Government have demonstrated throughout the course of the referendum debate that they are quite happy to ask hypothetical questions and complain when people are unable to answer them, but they are unwilling to respond positively to the questions that people are asking them.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I am sorry that I missed the first part of my hon. Friend’s speech; I very much look forward to reading it tomorrow. While the view of the general public is that infringements on the rights of Parliament are the result of the intervention of the European Court of Human Rights, will my hon. Friend confirm that even if we were to leave the European convention on human rights and remain in the EU, we would still be subject to the same kind of interference from the European Court of Justice?

Mr Chope: Yes. It would be not only the same type of interference, but graver. That is the conclusion of the House of Lords EU Justice Sub-Committee, the report of which I referred to earlier and came out today. The European Court of Justice has much greater powers and can effectively remove legislation from our statutes. The European Court of Human Rights is much more restricted and can deal only with individual cases, which then can be the subject of negotiation and we can ultimately exercise more discretion or have a greater “margin of appreciation”, to put it in legal language. As Lord Woolf was saying, the European convention on human rights may not be perfect, and we may not like the way in which it has been changed by judge-made law, but most people would agree with its actual wording.

The European charter of fundamental rights is anathema. You may recall, Mr Deputy Speaker, that when the charter was first brought forward, the then Labour Government were saying that it would have no application to the United Kingdom, the then Minister for Europe, the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz),
memorably said that it would have no more status in UK law than a copy of the Beano. That just illustrates the speed with which change comes about. One moment we think that an idea has been passed which is not going to apply to us and now we find, on the highest authorities in the land, that we are indeed subordinate to the European Court of Justice and that the European fundamental rights agency and charter are supreme. My plea to the Minister is: can we get this sorted out? Will he confirm that the UK would be in an absurd position if it wanted to stay in the EU but denounced the European convention on human rights?

11.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Dominic Raab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) on securing tonight’s debate and pay tribute to his recent work as chair of the UK delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. He is very knowledgeable in this field and he made a very powerful speech.

For all the contentious debate about human rights, few argue against the common-sense list of rights set out in the text of the European convention on human rights. The Government are and will remain committed to the protection of those rights. The United Kingdom was a founder member of the convention and was instrumental in its drafting. I have said on a number of occasions that those who suggest it was somehow an exclusively British creation are overegging the pudding or rewriting history. The negotiation of the convention saw an interesting contest of views between the common law and civil law traditions, as evidenced clearly in the travaux préparatoires of the convention, which are available online. The convention—the product of those negotiations—reflects the compromise between those two very different traditions and approaches.

Nevertheless, the concerns that have arisen about the convention are far less about being objections to the strict list of rights set out there; they lie more with its interpretation and application, which has been expanded and extended exponentially, well beyond what the original drafters intended. That is partly the result of judicial legislation by the Strasbourg Court, but it has been compounded by the design and structure of the Human Rights Act. It should be pointed out at this stage that serious criticisms have come from Labour Lord Chancellors, lawyers across the spectrum and senior British judges, as well as from Government Members. These problems have fuelled a rights inflation that has undermined this country’s liberal tradition of freedom and its approach to human rights, which is founded in Magna Carta and in the thinking of great British philosophers from John Locke and John Stuart Mill through to Isaiah Berlin. We have shifted towards imposing more and more obligations on government that require it to provide, rather than merely insisting that it refrain from acting in certain arbitrary ways, which was very much the history and tradition of the liberal approach. These developments have exposed us unnecessarily to judicial legislation at home and in Strasbourg that takes decisions out of the hands of this House.

Sir Edward Leigh: The Minister is making a powerful critique of the convention, so perhaps he can now tell the House when we are going to fulfil our manifesto commitment to get out of it.

Mr Raab: I will come on to the manifesto commitment and resolve to deliver on it shortly.

I want to make this point very clearly: there are legitimate different views as to what we should include in a list of fundamental human rights. There are liberal models, Marxist models and a social democratic tradition, which informs an approach to human rights. There is even a shift from individual rights to collective ones, including environmental rights. We can take different views on that, and hon. Members will, but whatever our view, if we are a democrat, the legislation and the definition of that list of rights must be made by elected representatives who are accountable to the British people. That is the objection to a rights inflation through judicial legislation—whether it takes place at home or abroad. It corrodes the most basic principles of democracy, and that was a point that my hon. Friend made very clearly and powerfully.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am very grateful indeed to the Minister for allowing me to intervene at this late hour. The Minister will know when he reads through the Belfast agreement signed on Good Friday—I am sure that he has studied it at length—that the European convention on human rights is an integral part of that agreement and that that agreement was voted on in a referendum in Northern Ireland and also in the Republic of Ireland and thousands and thousands of people supported that agreement. Where does the Minister think it would leave the peace settlement in Northern Ireland if this country were to withdraw—and I hope that it does not—from the European convention on human rights?

Mr Raab: I will come on to address that point very squarely in a moment. I hope to be able to give the hon. Lady the reassurance that she needs.

I will, if I may, return to some of the problems of the democratic deficit that have been created. One example that has been mentioned by Members on a number of occasions is the creeping extra-territorial extension of the convention. The negotiating record of the European convention—the travaux préparatoires—is very clear on that point. No one intended that those making military decisions on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan should or would be subject to the convention. That area was rightly left for the law of armed conflict, including international humanitarian law.

Another example, to which my hon. Friend referred, is the situation whereby increasingly elastic interpretations of article 8 rights to family life override the very clear public interest in deporting serious foreign criminals. The Government are clear that where there is a real risk of torture to an individual, they should not be deported, but the right to family life is an inherently qualified one and must be balanced against the rights of others. That balance, which should properly rest with Parliament, has been tipped out of kilter too much and by too great a degree by the courts. This is not to attack the ECHR. In truth, those making that point are being faithful to the convention, because paragraph 2 of article 8 makes it crystal clear that Governments should be able to qualify the right to family life to take effective law enforcement measures. In this regard, it is the judicial branch, which is, through creative extrapolation—that is the most generous gloss that can be put on it—departing from the convention. Those are two illustrations. There could be many more, but we have limited time this evening.
There are two strong reasons why this Government will reform the UK’s human rights framework, and with it, our relationship with the Strasbourg Court. The Government were elected with a clear mandate to deliver that reform, and I can confirm to my hon. Friends that we remain absolutely resolute about delivering on that pledge.

Our proposals will remain faithful to the principles in the European convention—I hope that the hon. Lady will be reassured on that point. Our focus will be on restraining and restricting the expansion of rights by the Strasbourg Court and the Human Rights Act, without proper democratic oversight.

Lady Hermon rose—

Mr Raab: If the hon. Lady will give me more of an opportunity to address her concern.

As the 2015 Conservative party manifesto pledged, the Government will repeal the Human Rights Act and replace it with a British Bill of Rights. Our aim is to protect fundamental rights, prevent the abuse of human rights law and restore some common sense to the system.

My hon. Friend asked for clarification—the hon. Lady did as well—on the Government’s position on the European convention. Let me repeat what I and the Justice Secretary made clear at oral questions towards the end of last month. Although we cannot rule out withdrawal from the convention forever, that is not part of the proposals that we are finalising for consultation. We aim to achieve reforms while remaining members of the European convention. Our proposals will help restore a more balanced separation of powers between the proper role of the courts and greater respect for the Supreme Court in this country, and also the proper role of the Legislature and of Parliament.

Lady Hermon: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way. Two points require clarification. The Minister appears to have completely contradicted the line taken by the Home Secretary, for whom I have great regard. She clearly stated in this House that it was her wish that we would withdraw from the convention. The Minister can confirm this evening that that is not Government policy—that there is no intention of this country withdrawing from the European convention on human rights. As for a British Bill of Rights, would that extend to Northern Ireland, or does Northern Ireland have to come up with its own formulation?

Mr Raab: On the position on the convention, I think the hon. Lady will find that the Home Secretary’s remarks were made not in this House, but elsewhere. The Home Secretary is, of course, entitled to her view; there is a degree of licence and latitude in the current debate on the EU. I and the Justice Secretary made clear at oral questions towards the end of last month. Although we cannot rule out withdrawal from the convention forever, that is not part of the proposals that we are finalising for consultation. We aim to achieve reforms while remaining members of the European convention. Our proposals will help restore a more balanced separation of powers between the proper role of the courts and greater respect for the Supreme Court in this country, and also the proper role of the Legislature and of Parliament.

Critically, our reform agenda is not about eroding people’s fundamental rights. The United Kingdom has a proud tradition of respect for human rights that goes back long before the Human Rights Act 1998, and long before the European convention. Our history of protecting human rights at home and fighting for them abroad stretches back over 800 years to Magna Carta, and even before that, in truth.

We will take no lectures from the Labour party on this front. It was the last Labour Government who introduced identity cards and proposed 90 days’ detention without charge.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): How is that relevant?

Mr Raab: In stark contrast, the last Conservative-led Government scrapped identity cards and cut pre-charge detention. The reason why it is relevant, as the right hon. Lady should know, is that actions speak louder than words.

Fiona Mactaggart rose—

Mr Raab: I will not give way, because the time I have left is so limited. This Government also brought forward the Modern Slavery Act 2015. We have transformed the fight against sexual violence in conflict, persuading more than 150 states to agree for the first time that sexual violence should be recognised as a grave breach of the Geneva conventions. This is a record that we can be proud of, and are committed to building on. Our commitment will not falter or fail, but we need to restore some credibility to human rights, which many people in this country increasingly view as dirty words—an industry or bandwagon for lawyers, rather than a tradition to take pride in. We can do that by restoring common sense to the system. We are confident that we can deliver our common-sense reforms within the bounds and parameters of the European convention.

We have already sought and listened to views from practitioners, non-governmental organisations, academics and politicians right across the entire United Kingdom. We know there has been consistently strong public support for these measures. We will consult fully on our forthcoming proposals before introducing legislation, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch will, as ever, bring to bear his considerable expertise and experience at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe as we proceed with the Bill in the House.

Mr Chope: Does my hon. Friend agree that we will be much more able to implement his agenda if we leave the European Union?

Mr Raab: The relationship between the convention and the EU is complicated; we risk shedding more heat than light on the subject by conflating the two. It is certainly true to say that if we pulled out of the convention altogether, it would be something of an open invitation to the Luxembourg Court to fill the vacuum.

Question put and agreed to.

11.23 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

NHS Bursary

1. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of his proposals to reform the NHS bursary on future levels of recruitment into the medical professions. [904937]

7. Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of his proposals to reform the NHS bursary on future levels of recruitment into the medical professions. [904943]

10. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of his proposals to reform the NHS bursary on future levels of recruitment into the medical professions. [904946]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): The reform to the NHS bursary will lift the cap currently placed on university places for nurses, midwives and allied health professions. Universities will be able to train up to 10,000 extra students by the end of this Parliament. This increase in UK graduates will reduce NHS reliance on expensive agency staff and staff from overseas.

Stuart C. McDonald: I am certain that the Minister will want to congratulate the SNP on sweeping spectacularly to a historic third successive term, all on a manifesto pledge to protect rather than abolish the nursing bursary in Scotland. The serious question is this: how does the Secretary of State plan to monitor the impact that the removal of the bursary might have on students from poorer backgrounds who are training as nurses in England?

Ben Gummer: I would like to congratulate my friend the leader of the Scottish Conservative party, who has led the extraordinary resurgence of Conservatism and Unionism north of the border.

I regret very much that the SNP is not endorsing our plan to give opportunity to thousands more people who want to become nurses, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds. We will of course monitor the reform, not only as we continue our process towards making a decision, taking account of all the equalities analysis that will be done in the interim, but after the final decision has been made.

Carol Monaghan: It is recognised that there is a high proportion of mature students of nursing and other health professions. How does the Secretary of State plan to monitor the impact that the removal of the bursary will have and provide support to students who have family commitments or who already have a student loan from a previous degree?

Ben Gummer: The NHS benefits enormously from mature students entering the service, and that is why we have already said that we will be looking at offering second-degree bursaries in the scheme. The consultation is clear: it asks a number of open questions, inviting responses from nurses and nurse trainees about how best to support mature students. We will be looking at those carefully as we formulate our conclusions.

Martyn Day: With the increased cost of training as a nurse and a 1% pay freeze throughout this Parliament, how does the Secretary of State plan to recruit and retain sufficient nurses in permanent posts in the short term, so that patient care and staff wellbeing are not negatively affected?

Ben Gummer: South of the border we have been able over the past six years to increase the number of nurses, both in training and in the service, which has been made possible by the stronger economy and the stewardship of the NHS, in such contrast to the developing picture in Scotland. We are able to expand the numbers in training by up to 10,000 between now and 2020 as a result of that innovative policy, and that is why it should also be adopted in Scotland.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What lessons has the Minister learned from the experience in higher education, where bursaries or grants were removed and replaced with student loans, and we have seen an increased number of students from all backgrounds?

Ben Gummer: We have indeed, and it is remarkable that south of the border we have seen a university that would equate to the fourth largest in the country filled with those who would not previously have gone to university as a result of the reforms that we introduced in 2011. I want to see those benefits extended across the range including to those who have not so far had them—namely, student nurses.
Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Considering the importance and the central role of nurses in the medical profession and in helping people when they are ill, how long does the Minister expect it will take on average for a nurse working in the NHS to pay back the total debt that would be accrued under the Government’s proposed replacement for the bursary scheme?

Ben Gummer: It depends of course on the career progression of that particular nurse, but the repayment terms will be precisely those for students of other degrees. Newly qualified nurses will not pay any more than they do currently, and the exact rates at which they will pay back—9% above £21,000—are outlined carefully in the consultation document. I recommend that the hon. Lady looks at it and sees the benefits that will come from the reform that, were it to be adopted in Scotland, would provide an enormous benefit to the service north of the border.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I start by congratulating the Secretary of State on becoming the longest serving Health Secretary in history. It is an important-landmark, not least because it is the first target that he has managed to hit.

On NHS bursaries, last week the Minister said that “more mature students are applying now than in 2010.”—[Official Report, 4 May 2016; Vol. 609, c. 197] However, a written answer given to me yesterday by the Minister for Universities and Science appears to contradict this. Indeed, it shows that numbers of mature students have fallen in the past five years by almost 200,000. Given that the average age of a student nurse is 28, and in the light of the clear evidence from his own Government, will the Minister correct the record and commit to looking again at the impact of these proposals on mature students, who form a significant part of the student nurse intake?

Ben Gummer: I, too, as I know will all my ministerial colleagues, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on a remarkable tenure in his post. It is clear that mature student numbers dropped immediately after the higher education reforms, but they then started rising and have now exceeded the rate before the reforms. I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman the details of that. We are also clear that we need to nurture mature students, which is why the consultation asked the specific question that it did. We want to invite answers from the service about how best we can do that because we are clear that the current system is not working as well as it should.

Specialist Nurses: Disabled People

2. Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of specialist nurses in supporting disabled people.

Ben Gummer: Specialist nurses make a valuable contribution to the care of disabled people. They have specialist post-registration qualifications, which are attained through additional training. There are now 3,000 more nurses working in the NHS than in May 2010, ensuring that disabled people continue to receive the highest possible quality care.

Debbie Abrahams: In May 2010 there were 5,360 learning disability nurses. In January 2016 there were 3,619. The Government promised to protect the NHS frontline. Why does this protection not extend to people with learning disabilities?

Ben Gummer: It is true that the skills mix and the way in which specialist nurses have changed over the past six years may well account for the variation that the hon. Lady has noticed—I am willing to write to her with the detail—but the total number of nurses has increased, and we are giving better and more varied training to nurses across the board so that they can deal with the specialist problems that are increasingly the core part of their work.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response. Specialist nurses are vital for the care and support that they provide for patients and families, not just for the elderly but for the disabled. What is his Department doing to ensure that funding for specialist nurses is maintained and that we do not end up in the situation that we have in Northern Ireland with Four Seasons, which is responsible for 62 homes in Northern Ireland and 450 across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Ben Gummer: Funding for nurses has increased over the past six years. It is because of the sixth largest increase in the NHS budget that we can guarantee that nursing numbers will remain in that strong position for the remainder of this Parliament. That will include specialist nurses. My role is to make sure that as many nurses as possible get additional training so that we have a wider and richer skills mix, specifically so that nurses can develop their careers—something that I am afraid was often made more difficult rather than easier under the previous career structure.

Biosimilar Medicines

3. Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): What steps he is taking to encourage the use of biosimilar medicines in NHS treatment.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman): The biosimilars—the generic versions of biologic products—represent part of the extraordinary range of new drugs that are becoming available for the benefit of our patients. The Government are committed to ensuring access to drugs for UK patients at the highest level of quality and safety, and to ensuring that effective biosimilar medicines are available. That is why we are leading, not just here but in Europe, the regulatory regime through the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency as the lead assessor and rapporteur. In the NHS, the chief pharmaceutical officer, Keith Ridge, and the commercial medicines unit in my directorate have put together a framework agreement for biosimilars, and through the medicines optimisation programme we are looking specifically at biosimilars, and we have set up a national biosimilars medicines group.
Dr Mathias: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. May I ask also that where NHS pharmacists are involved in oncology clinics, there is a higher prescribing of biosimilars? What steps are in place to encourage more oncology clinics to involve NHS pharmacists at the start of the patient’s treatment journey?

George Freeman: Not surprisingly, my hon. and, in this field, learned Friend makes a very important point. We have set up a number of initiatives to that very end: to make sure that our pharmacologists and pharmacists in the system are alert and have all the information they need to increase the prescription of biologics and the generic versions, biosimilars. I will happily write to her, describing a range of initiatives that are in place which we are pursuing to that end.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): One of the issues around the adoption of biosimilars and, indeed, driving down the NHS drugs budget generally is the lack of local analysis of patterns of prescribing against efficacy and cost. I wonder whether the Minister would consider encouraging clinical commissioning groups to appoint analytical pharmacists, who could look at this equation and recommend different prescribing decisions on a local basis.

George Freeman: My hon. Friend makes a really interesting point. It goes to the heart of the work that we are doing at the moment with CCGs, in terms of use of data to map and track prescribing practice across the system. I will happily pick up the point about ensuring biosimilars are incorporated in that.

Lyme Disease

4. Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): What progress has been made on improving diagnosis and treatment of Lyme disease.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): Lyme disease is a complex infection, so we recognise that there are real challenges in diagnosis and treatment. In the light of this, I am pleased to say that the Department plans to commission three reviews on the diagnosis, treatment and transmission of Lyme disease to inform future decision making.

Andrew Stephenson: A constituent in Earby was struck down with a debilitating illness several years ago, which has totally destroyed her quality of life. Since then, I have been visiting her regularly at home every few months, as she has fought to get a diagnosis. Over recent months, all the evidence has started to point towards Lyme disease, but there seems to be precious little support out there for people with this condition. What more can my hon. Friend do to support constituents like mine?

Jane Ellison: In addition to the reviews that the chief scientific adviser is overseeing, we have commissioned the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to develop a new evidence-based guideline for care, specifically to respond to the sort of situation that my hon. Friend describes with his constituent. That is for publication in 2018 and it is being prioritised because of the interest in this area.

Agency Staffing Expenditure

5. John Pugh (Southport) (LD): What plans he has to reduce agency staffing expenditure in the NHS. [904941]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): We have taken tough measures to control unsustainable spending on agency staff, which cost the NHS more than £3 billion last year. Overall agency spend is now falling and we expect to save the NHS at least £1 billion this year as a result.

John Pugh: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. I do not share his optimism. Is not the real problem the shortage of permanent staff and the budgetary constraints on the acute sector? Most of them are now below establishment.

Mr Hunt: I think the hon. Gentleman is right that we have historically not trained enough staff to work in the NHS and been over-optimistic about the staff needs. That is why, in this Parliament, we will be training over 11,000 more doctors as a result of the spending review, and 40,000 more nurses.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): In the Public Accounts Committee, which I sit on with the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh), we have repeatedly come to this question about agency staffing. The key thing is, as he says, that the establishment level for acute hospitals is always under par, because the budget set from the centre is never enough to meet it. Will the Secretary of State go and take a serious look at this issue, and stop this myth that it is just down to the rates paid? That is part of the problem, but it is not the main problem.

Mr Hunt: Perhaps I can give the hon. Lady some comfort. I recognise that there is a big mountain to move, but the changes we made last year were not just about changing the rates paid to agencies. They were also about capping the amounts agencies can pay their own staff, because we think it is incredibly divisive inside hospitals to have two nurses doing exactly the same work, but one being paid dramatically more than the other. We are also capping the total amount hospitals can spend on agency staff. The result is that the monthly spend on agency staff is now falling and we are on track to reduce the agency bill by about £1 billion in this Parliament.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): Spending on agency staff has gone through the roof under this Health Secretary, and the Secretary of State’s attempt to deal with the symptoms of the problem but not the cause has left hospitals struggling to get staff at rates they are allowed to pay. In the past few weeks we have seen reports of emergency surgery suspended in Doncaster, an A&E department downgraded in Chorley and two critical care units closed in Leeds, all because of staff shortages. The Health Secretary has admitted that this will be his last big job in politics. May I urge him before he goes to get a grip on the cause of the staffing crisis? Otherwise, it will be patients who will be facing the consequences long after he has gone.
Mr Hunt: May I start by thanking the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) for his generous congratulation earlier, and indeed for making history himself by being the first Opposition Member I can remember to congratulate the Government on hitting a target?

I say to the hon. Lady that, as a result of the measures we have taken to deal with the agency staff issue, we think we have saved £290 million compared with what we would have spent since last October, two thirds of trusts are reporting savings and the price paid for agency nurses is 10% lower than it was in October. The root cause of the problem is, as the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) said, our failure in the past to recruit enough staff. One of the reasons for that is that successive Governments failed to understand the needs of nursing in wards, which is why we had the problem at Mid Staffs. Because we are addressing that, we are now able to make sure that we do not pay excessive rates for agency staff.

Heidi Alexander: If I may turn to another part of the staffing crisis, all Opposition Members welcome the resumption of talks on the junior doctors contract. It is in no one’s interest—not the Government’s, not junior doctors’ and certainly not patients’—for this dispute to drag on any longer. May I implore the Health Secretary to do all he can to find a reasonable compromise this week that will keep doctors in the NHS and ensure that we have a motivated, well trained and fairly rewarded workforce to continue to deliver the excellent care we all want?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her reasonable tone and absolutely give her that assurance. We have always wanted a negotiated outcome to this dispute. That is why we paused the introduction of the new contracts last November to give talks a chance to succeed, and it is why this week I have said we will further pause the introduction of the new contracts to see whether we can get a negotiated outcome. We want a motivated workforce and we are highly cognisant of the fact that hospitals that offer seven-day care and higher standards of care for patients are the very hospitals that have some of the highest levels of morale in the NHS. It takes two to tango, and I very much hope that the British Medical Association will play ball and its part this week in helping us to deliver a safer seven-day NHS.

Rarer Cancers

6. Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): What steps he is taking to improve the outcomes of people with rarer cancers. [904942]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman): The extraordinary pace of progress in biomedical science, not least in genomics and data, is transforming our understanding of cancer. It is leading to greater identification of more rare cancers, and indeed to more diseases becoming rare diseases. That is why we have invested so heavily in Genomics England and set up the 13 genomic medicine centres around the UK, leading in cancer and rare disease diagnosis. I am delighted that we are now setting up a Northern Ireland General Medical Council, which will collect 17,000 samples. We will implement the recommendations of the independent cancer taskforce on diagnosis and we are setting up a series of regional genetic laboratories and infrastructure. I believe the hon. Gentleman will be able to see that we are investing heavily in making sure we lead not only in the science but in the adoption of genomic medicine in the NHS.

Mark Durkan: I thank the Minister for all that, but remind him that there is concern about the implications of the cancer drugs fund details, as they will affect people with rare cancers. Is he prepared to promote progress on rare and less-common cancers as part of the new work programme for the British-Irish Council? The challenges of small patient numbers, thinner investment in research, and symptoms being less well known are not confined to his jurisdiction.

George Freeman: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. In both Northern Ireland and the Republic, I have seen some great leadership in this field, and as the UK Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences, I would be delighted to pick this up through that council, and suggest that our nations, working together, can collaborate better, not least in implementing the accelerated access reforms that I am putting in place. Those reforms, aligned with the cancer drugs fund in its revised format, should see us able to accelerate the adoption of drugs for rarer cancers for patients’ benefit.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): In part because they are the hidden majority, people with rarer cancers are often diagnosed later, often through an emergency presentation. That can make for more aggressive treatments, which can have a longer-term impact on health. Will the Minister update the House on the new work programme for the British-Irish Council?

George Freeman: I am very grateful for that acknowledgment. We have put £1 billion into the cancer drugs fund, and we are completely committed to increasing the pace at which we bring cancer drugs through. It is true that cancer outcomes have improved quickly since 2010; in 2014-15, over 645,000 more patients with suspected cancers were seen. That is an increase of 71%. Almost 40,000 more patients were treated for cancer—an increase of 17%. We have announced funding of up to £300 million a year by 2020 to increase diagnostic capacity, so that we can meet the new target, which is that patients will be given a definitive cancer diagnosis or the all-clear within 28 days of being referred by a GP.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): We are very grateful for all the work that is going on, and for how we are pulling together and working as a United Kingdom, but is there any way of helping those people who cannot afford to travel to the specialists to get the treatment? That is a huge chunk out of a devolved budget, and it is something that we should be working on together.

George Freeman: I will happily look at that as part of the discussions with the council that I just touched on. We are determined to make sure that this life science revolution is not just in the Oxford-Cambridge-London triangle, but goes out across all the devolved areas,
which of course are leading on much of the science. That is why we are committed, through the National Institute for Health Research and the NHS, to creating hubs across the country, so that everybody can benefit.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware that about a third of people, including those with rare cancers, will, on their cancer journey, use some form of complementary or alternative medicine? Is he further aware that there is a range of new treatments out there that are being used in the private sector, including virotherapy and hyperbaric oxygen therapy? The second particularly can help people who have serious effects from chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Will he look at some of these treatments and write to me about them?

George Freeman: I am not against people taking whatever they feel helps, but my hon. Friend will understand that in this field, in allocating every pound, we need to be guided by the very best science and evidence. Internationally, we are applauded for the quality of our assessment, and I intend to do everything to make sure that that continues.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Outcomes in cancer are not just about survival. Does the Minister agree that nowhere is the case for a seven-day NHS stronger than in palliative medicine, and will he say what can be done, in rolling out the 7/7 NHS, to address the scandal whereby only one in five hospitals has specialist palliative care cover on a Saturday and Sunday?

George Freeman: My hon. Friend makes a really important and specific point. He is absolutely right, and that is one reason why we are committed to our seven-day NHS. It is improving—I can share the data with him—but he makes a good point, and that is one reason why we need to continue.

Social Care Budgets

8. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of changes to local authority social care budgets on demand for health services.

The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): Good morning, Mr Speaker—[Interruption]—and everyone.

There is a link between adult social care funding and demand for NHS services. More recent analysis shows no definitive relationship, but Forder’s 2009 study showed a £1 reduction in social care spend increasing NHS demand by 35p. That is why Government have driven the integration of health and social care, and given councils up to £3.5 billion of new support by 2019-20.

Chi Onwurah: The Royal College of Surgeons has said that “the new council tax precept will not raise enough funds for the areas of the country” with the greatest need. In Newcastle, it will raise £1.7 million this year, but the funding gap is £15 million. Why is the Minister’s Government making my constituents pay more for worse social care, increasing the pressure on the NHS and causing misery for millions?

Alistair Burt: The better care fund has been adjusted to recognise that not all councils can raise a similar amount of money through the social care precept, so the issue that the hon. Lady raises has been noted and recognised. The only way in which the NHS can achieve better outcomes and meet the challenges of rising demand is through an increased focus on preventive community health and social care, and closer working with local authorities. That is what the pooled budget is designed to deliver, and that is what it will do.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Indeed, good morning, Mr Speaker.

A big challenge for local authorities and adult social care is how to fund the increases in the minimum wage that care providers have to pay. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) just detailed, the 2% social care precept does not cover all the increased costs and, indeed, in some areas, it is not even being passed on to care providers. The Local Government Association asked Ministers for £700 million from the better care fund to help with that increased cost this year and next year—not in 2019. When will Ministers listen to local councils and agree to bring forward that much needed funding to support what is effectively their own policy in the care sector?

Alistair Burt: I do not think that anyone fails to recognise that the next couple of years in social care will be very tight, but that is why the better care fund is there. Work has been done to increase the amount of money available to meet the challenges that the hon. Lady raises. I have to repeat that to fund this properly there has to be a sufficiently strong economy. There has to be the commitment to funding that the Government have been able to make almost uniquely in the House. I sometimes think it would help if she recognised the strength of the economy that has been able to do that by assisting local authorities, rather than complain about the amount of money available.

Accident and Emergency Services

9. Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure provision of good quality A&E services.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Although we are not currently hitting the national A&E target, hospital A&E departments continue to perform well under great pressure. Overall they are coping with 1.9 million more attendances annually compared with 2009-10, and the average wait to see a doctor remains just 38 minutes.

Chris Green: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Many of my constituents are concerned about the temporary closure of the Chorley A&E department, which now only operates as an urgent care service. Many of my constituents are concerned about the temporary closure of the Chorley A&E department, which now only operates as an urgent care service. What assurance can he give my constituents on A&E cover in and around the Bolton West constituency?

Mr Hunt: May I reassure my hon. Friend that I am very aware of this issue, and I have had a number of meetings with hon. Members to discuss it? Patient safety has to be the utmost priority. We are working with the local trust, and we have been given an assurance
that neighbouring hospitals will be able to absorb any extra activity, and that it is working hard to try to reopen the A&E department.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The temporary closure of A&E services at Chorley hospital has had a knock-on effect on hospitals across Lancashire, and anecdotally I hear of many more people turning up at Preston Royal. What reassurances can the right hon. Gentleman give my constituents and residents across Lancashire that he is doing everything he can to make sure that the staffing issues at Chorley are fixed and that Chorley A&E is open again?

Mr Hunt: I can reassure the hon. Lady that we have been monitoring the situation closely and have provided extra capacity at the Royal Preston hospital. Her own Royal Lancaster infirmary has recently come out of special measures and done a really good job in turning round the quality of care after protracted difficulties. We continue to monitor the situation, and patient safety is our No. 1 priority.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Following centralisation and specialisation processes to drive up the quality of clinical care, we now have patients presenting at minor injuries units and urgent care centres with conditions that need to be treated elsewhere. Will my right hon. Friend take steps to ensure that those centres own the patients’ experience once they have presented, so that we never again have a patient with a serious illness being sent out to make their own way to A&E?

Mr Hunt: As ever on health matters, my hon. Friend speaks wisely. The fundamental issue is a high level of confusion about what happens to patients when they are faced with a bewildering choice about what to do when they have an urgent health need that needs resolving. They can call 111, try to get an urgent GP appointment, go to a walk-in centre, go to A&E and many other alternatives. We need to resolve that and make it simpler for patients so that they go to the right place first time. Urgent work is happening to ensure that we do that.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The closure of the A&E unit at Chorley and South Ribble district general hospital has ramifications across the north-west. I am informed that North West Ambulance Service has taken on three private ambulances at a cost of £70,000 each a month to provide the extra cover that is required. Does the Secretary of State accept that it is a false economy when he allows A&E units to close on his watch? He simply passes on the costs to other parts of the fractured NHS over which he presides.

Mr Hunt: I recognise that we have a difficult situation in Chorley and that people in that trust are working very closely together. The chief executive of the trust pointed out that the reason for the closure was that neighbouring trusts were not respecting the caps on agency staff that she was respecting. It is incredibly important that, across the NHS, we have a concerted effort to bring down the prices paid for agency staff, which I think is the root problem here. However, we are monitoring the situation closely.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): But how will my right hon. Friend’s powers to ensure good quality accident and emergency provision in hospitals across Greater Manchester be affected by the devolution of health and social care responsibilities to Greater Manchester councils?

Mr Hunt: I can reassure my hon. Friend that, although we are happy to put the local authorities in Greater Manchester in the driving seat for some major changes, including what I hope will be the first full-scale integration of health and social care across the NHS, we are monitoring the performance against national standards. We will be able to see exactly how well they do on patient safety, waiting times and so on, and whether they live up to the big promises that have been made.

Junior Doctors: Industrial Dispute

11. John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What steps he is taking to resolve the industrial dispute with junior doctors.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Talks are now taking place between NHS employers and the British Medical Association to try to resolve outstanding issues around the junior doctors’ contract.

John Nicolson: In his recent letter to the head of the BMA, the Secretary of State offered to discuss improving work-life balance, especially for people with family responsibilities. How exactly does he plan to do that with a contract that the Government’s own quality impact assessment has identified as especially disadvantaging women?

Mr Hunt: That is not correct. It is worth saying that the reason for the dispute is a manifesto commitment to a seven-day NHS that the Government made to the people of England and that the Scottish National party has not made to the people of Scotland. The weekend effect does not happen just in England. There are studies in Scotland, including the Handel study, which states: “The excess of admissions ending in deaths at weekends compared with those during weekdays seen elsewhere were also found in Scotland.”

I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that yes, we want to improve the quality of life for junior doctors so that they can live and work in the same city as their partners, and we are looking at the solution to that problem, but that he might think about doing the same thing in Scotland.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend bear it in mind that Secretary of State Dean Rusk always said that jaw-jaw was better than war-war, and that it is welcome that the negotiations have resumed with the BMA on this difficult problem? Does he also accept that everyone wishes the talks well so that we can get a meaningful agreement that ensures a seven-day NHS for the benefit of patients and their safety?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend speaks very wisely. Indeed, I was thinking about the talks as I spoke on my mobile phone and he was having a cigarette just outside the House yesterday morning. He is absolutely right about jaw-jaw. That is why I think that across the whole House we wish the talks well. However, for them to succeed all sides need to recognise their objective, which is a safer seven-day service for patients. I hope that, on that basis, we will be able to make progress.
Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I too am glad that the Secretary of State has reopened talks with the junior doctors, but I am a little concerned by the claim that the only issue is Saturday pay, whereas the doctors tell me that they fear the danger of exhaustion. Has he seen the analysis by Cass Business School suggesting that it is impossible to avoid high levels of fatigue under the new contract?

Mr Hunt: What I have done in the new contract is precisely to try to address those issues by reducing the maximum number of hours that junior doctors can be asked to work every week from 91 to 72 and by stopping junior doctors being asked to work six nights in a row or seven long days in a row. These are important steps forward, and the hon. Lady may want to look at Channel 4 FactCheck and other independent analysis of the safety aspects of the new contract which say that this contract is a safer contract.

Dr Whitford: I would just say that stating it does not make it happen. Junior doctors have looked at the rotas that have been put out as exemplars, and they will not be able to avoid high levels of fatigue. Does the Secretary of State not recognise that, now that we have more data suggesting that the weekend effect may just be statistical, we actually require clinical research because he does not know exactly what the problem is that he is trying to fix?

Mr Hunt: The new data that the hon. Lady has talked about have been heavily contested this week by some of the most distinguished experts on mortality rates in the country. Academics do sometimes disagree, but Ministers have to decide. The fact is that the overwhelming evidence—whether it is on cancer, cardiac arrests, maternity or emergency surgery, and whether it is in big studies, small studies, UK studies or international studies—is that there is a weekend effect. This Government are determined to do something about it, and I gently say to the hon. Lady that she might consider whether something similar should be done in Scotland.

Mr Hunt: The Secretary of State not recognise that, now that we have more data suggesting that the weekend effect may just be statistical, we actually require clinical research because he does not know exactly what the problem is that he is trying to fix?

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18. [904954] Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I am fully signed up to the national health service, and that is why I want to see the reopening of Chorley A&E as soon as possible. Many of my constituents use it.

In his compromising mood, will my right hon. Friend ensure that, as he talks to the junior doctors, whom I have always wanted a negotiated solution, but there is one bit that we will not compromise on: the moment that the Government start doing things that mean that we are not delivering safe care for patients is the moment that we will fundamentally shake confidence in the NHS. This Government will not allow that to happen.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In the end, the British people’s passion for, and commitment to, the NHS is based upon its offering the highest standard of care for patients. It is sometimes difficult to take these decisions and sometimes we have arguments around them. I want to reassure him that my compromising mood is not a temporary thing. We have always wanted a negotiated solution, but there is one bit that we will not compromise on: the moment that the Government start doing things that mean that we are not delivering safe care for patients is the moment that we will fundamentally shake confidence in the NHS. This Government will not allow that to happen.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are very time constrained, but I am very keen to get through a few more questions.

Healthcare Costs (EU and UK Citizens)

12. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How much was (a) collected in payment for NHS care received in the UK by EU citizens and (b) paid for healthcare received by UK citizens in other EU countries in the last 12 months.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): For 2014-15, it is estimated that the UK owes other European economic area countries and Switzerland £674 million and is owed £49.5 million by other EEA countries and Switzerland for healthcare activity received in that year.

Mr Hollobone: My constituents in Kettering are increasingly fed up with our national health service paying for the healthcare of foreigners who come to this country to freeload on our system. What more can be done to make sure that hospitals and other healthcare providers bill foreign citizens for the NHS services that they use in this country?

Jane Ellison: The Government take extremely seriously the issue of making sure that only those who should have access to NHS services do access them. Let me make an important point about the figures that I have just given. Some 80% of that imbalance statistic represents our pensioners who choose to retire to Europe, typically for sunnier weather. The figure is 80% because many more UK pensioners retire to Europe than European pensioners retire here, and there will always be an imbalance. I am sure that even the keenest Brexiteer would not claim that Britain would be sunnier outside the EU.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Will the Minister encourage her Back Benchers to study the expert evidence that was given recently to the Select Committee on Health on the issue that the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) has just raised, our access to free healthcare in Europe, and the economic shock that our leaving the European Union would cause to the NHS finances and to major public health measures such as clean air and clean water that benefit us immensely? Every single one of them told our Committee that leaving the European Union would be disastrous for the NHS, disastrous for health and disastrous for public health.

Jane Ellison: On this, I am happy to say that I very much agree with the right hon. Gentleman. I encourage all colleagues to look at the evidence deposited with the Committee. Just last year, UK European health insurance card holders—5.5 million people—were able to travel to any other EEA country or Switzerland safe in the knowledge that they would be able to receive free healthcare or reduced costs arising from healthcare if they needed it. That offers great peace of mind and shows that Britain is safer in a reformed EU.

Health and Social Care Integration

13. Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): What support his Department is providing for meeting additional costs incurred by NHS providers in the integration of health and social care.
The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): I concur with the remarks that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), just made.

The Government recognise that the NHS and adult social care face significant demand pressures, and established the better care fund to join up health and care. In 2016-17, the BCF will be increased to a mandated minimum of £3.9 billion, with additional social care funding of £1.5 billion by 2019-20.

Derek Thomas: NHS Cornwall has a significant overspend in 2015-16 because of the cost of keeping people in acute hospitals rather than their being cared for in the community. Despite the commitment and enthusiasm in Cornwall to achieve meaningful integration of health and social care, the pressure on NHS Cornwall finances threatens this badly needed integration. Does the Minister agree that investment in this today will lead to significant savings for the future and better outcomes for patients?

Alistair Burt: I am aware of significant problems in Cornwall that a number of Members have brought to me, and they are very complex. The clinical commissioning group is building on existing work with NHS England to address the financial challenges facing NHS Kernow and the wider local health and care system. Statutory directions were put in place late last year to support the CCG’s work with local partners in ensuring that services are affordable as well as good. An independently led capability and capacity review is being completed and an action plan is being implemented. I encourage the CCG to continue to work closely with NHS England to help to put its finances on a firmer foundation to achieve its integration plans. There is a further meeting planned locally tomorrow.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): We recently had a Westminster Hall debate on care workers not even being paid the national minimum wage, and now we have private social care providers saying that they will not be able to afford the new national living wage. How does the Department intend to address this impending crisis?

Alistair Burt: It is absolutely essential that workers are paid the national minimum wage, and for care workers that includes travel. The Department has been very clear in that regard. Extra money is being provided to local authorities to pay for social care, as we know, but matters are tight—I am well aware of that. We are looking to providers and local authority providers to meet their statutory obligations to ensure that hard-pressed care workers have the financial support they need to do their vital job.

Five Year Forward View

14. Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What progress his Department has made on delivery of the NHS five year forward view. [904950]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): We are making good progress in implementing the five year forward view, including £133 million invested in new models of care and 18 million people benefiting from extended GP access.}

Helen Whately: It is estimated that a third of patients in acute hospitals could be better treated elsewhere, for instance at home, and in east Kent our vanguard aims to address this with new models of care, but it is early days. Will my right hon. Friend advise us of what he is doing to drive progress on new models of care, bringing together health and social care so that more people are cared for in the right place?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to what is, in a way, the most fundamental point of the five year forward view, which is getting care to people earlier to help them live healthily and happily at home. Perhaps the most significant announcement we have had in the past few weeks has been the extra £2.6 billion a year that will be invested by the end of the Parliament in general practice. That is a 14% increase that will allow us to recruit many more GPs and, I hope, dramatically improve care for her constituents and others.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Yesterday the Health Secretary admitted to the Health Committee that “we didn’t protect the entire health budget” in the last comprehensive spending review. I am pleased that he appears to have adopted a bit of straight-talking, honest politics, so in that spirit will he now admit that the very real cuts to public health budgets over the next few years will make it harder to deliver the “radical upgrade” in public health that his five year forward view called for?

Mr Hunt: In the spirit of straight talking and honesty, which I think is an excellent thing, perhaps the hon. Gentleman might concede that those cuts and efficiencies that he is talking about would have been a great deal more if we had followed Labour’s spending plans—that is, £5.5 billion less for the NHS than this Government promised, on the back of a strong economy.

Topical Questions

T1. [904927] Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Last week I agreed to pause the introduction of the new junior doctors contract for five days and return to talks with the junior doctors committee. I commend the junior doctors for their decision to return to talks. They have agreed to suspend the threat of further industrial action and those talks are now in their second day. We have always been clear that we want to see a negotiated solution to this dispute, and the resumption of these talks shows that the Government’s door is and always has been open to meaningful talks.

Chris Davies: Last Friday I met my constituent Lisa Cass whose son Ben was recently diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. Ben had been showing signs of the four Ts of type 1 diabetes—toilet, thirst, tired and thinner—and Lisa took him to her local GP for an appointment. No test was done on the day at the surgery and a blood test was booked for the following week. The following day Ben was back at his GP’s surgery after a rapid decline which could have been fatal, and the air ambulance was called. Thankfully—credit is due to the excellent medical
professors who treated Ben—he is now doing well and is managing his condition. However, this case shows the need for awareness of type 1 diabetes to be improved right across the country. Will the Minister meet me and my constituent to see what more we can do to raise awareness of type 1 diabetes and its symptoms among health professionals and the wider public?

Mr Hunt: Of course I am happy meet my hon. Friend and his constituents. A close friend of mine who wanted to take a place in this House ended up dying tragically early because he had type 1 diabetes and was not able to get the care that he needed, so I am very aware of those issues. What we are doing in England, which is different from Wales, is publishing transparent indicators of the quality of diabetes care CCG by CCG. Those data will be published before the summer recess and will enable us to look at the disparities in care. I am sure there is more we can do.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Research published yesterday by NHS Providers and the Healthcare Financial Management Association showed that half of mental health trusts had not had an increase in their budget in 2015-16 and just a quarter of providers are confident that they will receive a funding increase for this financial year, 2016-17. Will the Secretary of State finally admit that the supposed additional investment in mental health that he talks about so often has not materialised for the patients and services that need it most? What is he going to do about it?

The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): I thank the hon. Lady for her question and for her support for me in the recent London marathon. With reference to her question, it is precisely for the reasons she gives that it is so important for us to make sure that CCGs do transfer the extra money that is available for mental health into mental health services. That is why there will be more transparency and a scorecard for CCGs. She is absolutely correct—it is essential that that money flows through and we are determined to ensure that. Yesterday’s report only shows how right our current actions are to make sure that that money materialises for the patients and services that need it most.

T3. [904930] Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): The Havant Men’s Shed movement has created community workspaces across my constituency, helping to boost mental health and wellbeing, especially for older residents. Will the Minister join me in congratulating the movement on its work and come to Havant to open its new building?

Alistair Burt: Yes. My family know I am a keen supporter of the shed movement, just as I am a keen supporter of the 5 Live Saturday afternoon movement and the beer in the shed movement. I can assure my hon. Friend that an opportunity to visit the Havant Men’s Shed movement will be an important part of the ministerial diary in the very near future.

Mr Speaker: The Minister is an endlessly noble fellow—I think we are very clear about that.

T2. [904928] Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): During March, at one of my local trusts the A&E ambulance target was missed for 937 patients, and more than 4,000 patients waited for more than four hours in A&E. Staff and management agree that this is a trust in crisis, with many wards staffed to less than half the minimum safe staffing levels. Patient safety is being compromised every day. Will the Secretary of State please stop passing the buck and act to stop the downgrade of Dewsbury and Huddersfield hospitals, because it is clear that our local healthcare is in absolute crisis?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: The hon. Lady mentioned to me yesterday that she would raise this issue today. We are absolutely not passing the buck; the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer), had a very productive meeting with her and local representatives to address these issues. She is right to have concerns about some of the safety indicators, but it is also true that summary hospital-level mortality for the trust has improved, and there are encouraging improvements in morale, as recorded through the NHS staff survey. However, there are worrying things, and we will continue to monitor them closely.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): Sussex CCGs are responsible for monitoring Coperforma’s performance, and High Weald Lewes Havens CCG acknowledges that, as my hon. Friend said, the early performance of the new non-emergency patient transport service has not been acceptable. For that reason, the CCG, on behalf of all Sussex CCGs, has begun an inquiry, with the aim of making a report available by June, and with interim progress reports. We will of course monitor the issue carefully.

T4. [904931] Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Last month, Coperforma took on the patient transport contract for Sussex. Unfortunately, since then there have been unacceptable and serious delays for some very sick and elderly patients. May I have assurances that the Department of Health will follow up this issue?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): Sussex CCGs are responsible for monitoring Coperforma’s performance, and High Weald Lewes Havens CCG acknowledges that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer), had a very productive meeting with her and local representatives to address these issues. She is right to have concerns about some of the safety indicators, but it is also true that summary hospital-level mortality for the trust has improved, and there are encouraging improvements in morale, as recorded through the NHS staff survey. However, there are worrying things, and we will continue to monitor them closely.

T5. [904933] Mr Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (UKIP): In my corner of Essex, there is a primary care crisis: demand for GP services is rising, the supply of GPs is falling and many surgeries are simply no longer accepting new patients. What assurance can the Minister give me that we will definitely get more GPs, and when will we get them?

Alistair Burt: The concerns the hon. Gentleman raises are very real, and they are shared by GPs around the country, which is why we put so much work into analysing them. The recently published “GP Five Year Forward View” addresses a number of concerns brought to us by GPs, but the determination to have 5,000 more doctors working in general practice by 2020 is a reflection of the fact that making sure there are enough doctors physically to work in general practice is an important aim of the Government’s.

T8. [904936] Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): My constituent Archie Hill and his parents, Louisa and Gary, were really excited when, on 15 April, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommended that the drug Translarna—a breakthrough drug for children with Duchenne muscular dystrophy—should be funded by NHS England. Hon. Members can imagine what happened when, on 4 May, NICE
unexpectedly announced that it required extra time to come to an agreement with NHS England. What is going on? We thought this drug had been cleared. Time is of the essence, because the boys affected are eligible for this drug only if they are still walking. Can we please look into this issue, and can we please go back to the original timetable? After all, these boys have had to wait several years to get to this stage.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman): I commend my right hon. Friend, and we have had numerous discussions over the last year on this subject. She can rest assured that I am actively doing everything I can to make sure we expedite this. She will understand that there are important negotiations with NHS England, NICE and the company at the moment, which are key to making sure we can get this drug accelerated quickly.

Mr Jeremy Hunt: The answer, regrettably, is that for many years we have not got our act together. That is why I have changed the system of incentives for trusts to make sure that they get a premium for identifying EU nationals they treat and that we can then rechannel the treatment to their home countries. We are, as a result, now seeing significant increases in the amount we are reclaiming from other countries.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Community hospitals are immensely valued by the communities they serve. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the proposals for south Devon, which will particularly affect my constituents living in Dartmouth and in Paignton?

Mr Hunt: Yes, I am happy to do that. I have a number of community hospitals in my own area. It is really important that even as the functions and jobs that community hospitals do inevitably change, we recognise that they have a very important long-term future in the NHS.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Wigan and Leigh NHS Foundation Trust to help it to cope with this crisis?

Mr Hunt: We are making sure that neighbouring hospitals have the resources to deal with the temporary closure of Chorley A&E. The more patients that any hospital sees, the more resources it gets. This is none the less a very worrying situation that we are monitoring very closely.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): The success regime review in Devon is causing real concern about the future of acute services at North Devon District Hospital. Does the Minister recognise that the unique geographical circumstances of Barnstaple mean that the reduction of any of those services will, for some of my constituents, mean a round journey of more than 120 miles to access them?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): I do recognise the unique geographical circumstances in my hon. Friend’s constituency. That is precisely why the success regime is being led by local clinicians. I hope and expect that in formulating plans they take account of all the views and all the clinical needs of his constituents and his own views.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): There is growing concern that the additional investment in children’s mental health services committed last year is not getting through to help children with mental health needs? It would be scandalous if it did not get through. Transparency is not enough.

Alistair Burt: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for all the work he did in relation to this. I can assure him that the £1.25 billion committed in the 2015 Budget will be available during the course of this Parliament. As I said to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), it is absolutely essential to me and to us that we make sure that that money does get through to CCGs. The regime will be more transparent, but there will be a determination to expose it to make sure that the money is spent on child and adolescent mental health services, as it needs to be.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be well aware that the business case for the rebuilding of the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital has been dragging on within the NHS for more than six years. We now seem to have a decision for the Trust Development Authority to make. Will he put pressure on the TDA to approve this business case so that work can begin this summer?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: As my hon. Friend knows, I have done a shift as a porter in that hospital and seen for myself just how much it needs the extra investment to transform its facilities. I will happily look into the matter for him, and I am keen to see it progress as fast as possible.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): The Minister will be aware that mortality rates in England and Wales have increased by 5.4% in 2015—the biggest increase in the death rate for decades. She will also be aware that mortality rates have been rising since 2011. Has she done any analysis of what has been behind those trends? Specifically, with the Cridland review starting, what will her Department do to negotiate with Cridland on the increase in the pensionable age to take account of the recent changes taking place?

Jane Ellison: We welcome the overall trend towards longer life expectancy. There are annual fluctuations, but overall the trend remains positive. The key thing is helping people to live longer, healthier lives. Therefore, tackling health inequalities among people of all ages and in all communities is embedded in policy right
across the Department—for example, the investment in nearly doubling the health visitor workforce over the previous Parliament—so that we can really bear down on the things that drive those health inequalities, particularly among poorer communities and poorer children.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for working so tirelessly to get the BMA back to the negotiating table. Will he confirm that Saturday pay for junior doctors will be at a 30% premium, which is above that for any of the hard-working midwives, nurses, firefighters, paramedics and so on in my constituency?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She makes the important point that the proposals on the table in the new contract are incredibly generous compared with the terms of the other people working in hospitals. That is why it is very important that we have some flexibility from the BMA on Saturday pay so that we can deliver the seven-day service that we all want. It is a very good deal for junior doctors, and I think that if they look at it objectively, we should be able to come to an agreement this week, but it will take flexibility on both sides.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I shall call the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Graham Allen) if he guarantees that his grey cells will produce a one-sentence, pithy question.

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): Will the Minister responsible for dental matters meet me and the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) to discuss dental ill health in children and how we can change the dentist contract to make it more prevention-friendly? I have got a lot more to say, but I will sit down.

Mr Speaker: That was possibly the hon. Gentleman’s greatest inquiry in his membership of the House.

Alistair Burt: Yes.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Marvellous. I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues, but we must move on. I am most grateful to colleagues for their good humour.
Child Refugee Resettlement

10.36 am

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): To ask the Home Secretary if she will make a statement on the resettlement of child refugees and the implementation of the Dubs amendment.

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): As I said last night, the Government are at the forefront of assisting and protecting vulnerable children wherever they are. As the House is aware, last week the Prime Minister said that we would work with local authorities on plans to resettle unaccompanied children from France, Greece and Italy. We have said that we expect the first children to arrive before the end of the year; we have not said that it will take until the end of the year for them to arrive. As I made clear to the House, we are working hard to ensure that isolated children are reunited with family and that children at risk of exploitation and abuse come to the UK as quickly as possible, but we have to be satisfied that they will receive appropriate care and support when they arrive.

The revised Dubs amendment to the Immigration Bill obliges us to consult local authorities. We must ensure that we fulfil our obligations to children who are already in the UK, as well ensuring that we have the right support for those who may be brought to the UK from Europe. The provisions in the Bill, by their nature, mean that we have to consult others before finalising our plans, but that does not imply that we will delay getting on with this. We will be contacting council leaders in the coming days, and I have already spoken to the Local Government Association about the matter.

We have always been clear that we must do nothing that inadvertently creates a situation in which families see an advantage in sending children ahead and putting their lives at risk by attempting perilous journeys to Europe. That is why only those who were present in the EU before 20 March will be eligible for resettlement, and only when it is in their best interests to come to the UK. That will avoid creating a perverse incentive for families to entrust their children to people traffickers.

We have already started to consult relevant non-governmental organisations, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNICEF and member states on how best to implement the legislation. Last Friday, I met the Greek Government in Athens to discuss how we can make progress quickly. We are already working to identify those whom we can help. We have an ongoing plan with France to improve our joint response to children in Calais. We have accepted more than 30 transfer requests since February, and more than 20 have already arrived. We will work with France over the coming days and weeks to increase the identification of children in France who have family here so that we can bring them over.

In addition, the UK has played its full part in supporting European neighbours to provide support to those who have arrived. We have provided nearly £46 million of funding to the Europe-wide response to help the most vulnerable, including children and infants. In addition, the £10 million Department for International Development fund that was announced on 28 January will support the UNHCR, Save the Children and the International Rescue Committee to work with host authorities to care for and assist unaccompanied or separated children. That is on top of our Syrian resettlement programme and the children at risk resettlement scheme, which is designed to resettle up to 3,000 children at risk from the middle east and north Africa where that is deemed to be in their best interests. The Government remain committed to making a full contribution to the global refugee crisis.

We are already acting to implement the amendment. We have started discussions with local government. We have begun work with European partners and NGOs to support effective implementation, and we will bring refugee children to the UK as quickly as is safe. I am proud that the commitment of this country and this Government to help those in need, both within and outside Europe, withstands comparison with that of any other country in the world.

Yvette Cooper: I have asked this urgent question because, at the end of the debate last night, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) raised the evidence that No. 10 had briefed that we would not see the first children arrive in Britain until the end of the year, which is in seven months’ time. That is in contrast with the urgency we heard from the Minister in yesterday’s debate. It is so frustrating to hear warm words and commitment, while at the same time No. 10 seems to be dragging its feet. To take the first children only by the end of the year is simply not good enough.

Let us look at the processes that should already be in place. For those who have family in the UK, the Government are processing only three to four cases a week at the moment, but more than 100 cases are pending. We need proper transparency and targets in relation to those who have family in the UK. Why will the Minister still not answer my parliamentary questions on how many applications have been made to the Home Office? Why is he still refusing to answer my freedom of information requests on how many Dublin III applications have been made? Why, if they are acting with such urgency, are the Government refusing to provide us with such information? We know that Help Refugees, Citizens UK and the Red Cross already have details of children in Europe who have family in this country who we could bring over now. UNICEF said yesterday:

“With the political will, these children could have their cases processed and be here in time to be packing their pencil cases for the new school year in September.”

Why will the Government not make a commitment at least to clear all the family cases already in the system by the time we get to the summer holidays?

As for the wider scheme, I still do not see why it will take seven months. Under pressure, the Government managed to bring in 1,000 refugees under the original Syrian refugee scheme—all tribute to them for doing so—in three months. The Canadian Government managed to take in 25,000 refugees in the space of three months. Children are at risk right now, so why will the Minister not make a commitment to accelerate the wider scheme as well? Has he even spoken to the independent schools, given that we know that 11-year-olds are still sleeping in tents in Calais on their own and 14-year-olds who want to be surgeons have been out of school for two years? Teenage boys who have been abused are at risk of being
abused again, and teenage girls cannot escape from forced marriages because there is no support for them to do so. Greece and Italy do not tell the children, “Stay on the boats until we have sorted it out.” Seven months may be very fast for a bureaucrat, but it is a very long time for a child. I urge the Minister to accept the bishops’ target of taking 300 children by the beginning of the next school year. I urge him to do so.

James Brokenshire: I again underline what I said in my response to the right hon. Lady’s urgent question: we intend to make progress during the course of this year and the first children will therefore arrive before the end of this year, but that does not mean it will take seven months. As I think she will recognise from everything I have said last night and today, we are making quick progress in implementing the provisions in the Dubs amendment to the Immigration Bill. What the Prime Minister’s spokesperson has said is entirely consistent with what the Prime Minister said in accepting the Dubs amendment at Prime Minister’s questions last Wednesday. I want to be absolutely explicit and crystal clear in relation to that.

The right hon. Lady refers to what is happening in Calais in France. As I have already said, we are continuing to work quickly with the French Government to speed up the processes. We have already taken steps to do so in terms of the existing arrangements. Clearly, there is a renewed focus given our acceptance of the Dubs amendment to the Immigration Bill. I absolutely want to use that as a means of speeding up and making more effective the processing of those with links to family in the UK. Vulnerable children can then be reunited with their extended family in the UK, which is in their best interests, and will no longer be isolated in France, Italy or Greece.

The right hon. Lady should look at how we have approached the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme—we have got on with it. I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees. Once we have stated our commitments, we get on with the practical implementation. We are doing that already, even though the Bill has not received Royal Assent.

We will continue in the days ahead to have those discussions within Government and with all the parties involved, so that we can make progress quickly and see that children who have family here and who are in need of support because of their vulnerability to exploitation come to the UK. I need to consult properly with local authorities in the spirit and the letter of the legislation. That is what we are doing and we will get on with it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the House of what should be clear from what has already been said: namely, that this urgent question is not about whether to take child refugees from Europe—that matter has been decided by the House—but about when and how. It is about the implementation, the logistics and the timing, so let us focus our exchanges on that basis.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Britain is being generous in its support for refugees in the region and for vulnerable people coming to this country, but because human traffickers are evil people who will exploit any opportunity for their vile trade there is a big danger that the message will go out from them: “Britain is open now to child refugees. Send us your children. We will take them to Britain.” What can Her Majesty’s Government do to ensure that we provide the support that is needed, but do not send the signal that more child refugees should start to make their way to Europe?

James Brokenshire: In implementing this policy, we are very conscious of the way in which people traffickers and smugglers can twist and interpret the statements that we make. I know that no one in this House would want to see more children lose their lives in the Mediterranean sea or in the Aegean, which has, sadly, been a consequence of these people trading in human misery. I assure my hon. Friend that we take this issue seriously. The best interests of the child are at the forefront of our activity. We will continue to underline the message that this scheme is for children who were in Europe prior to 20 March, so that it cannot be open to that misinterpretation.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Yesterday’s debate was very much about how the Government came to accept the final Dubs amendment. Today is clearly about the what and where we go from here. I am glad that this urgent question was granted, because there was an apparent discrepancy between the approach the Minister outlined yesterday and what The Daily Telegraph reported this morning had been briefed from No. 10. The Minister has dealt with that.

The resettlement scheme has expanded over time. It started as a scheme to support, rather than take, refugees. It was expanded to include victims of sexual violence, then 20,000 people over five years, and then 3,000 children and families from the region. It has now been expanded by the final Dubs amendment. In fairness, where the Government have accepted the spirit of the expansion, the scheme works well. I have seen the resettlement of families in Glasgow and Colchester, where the scheme works very well. This next iteration is a challenge, but there is a huge prize if we get it right, particularly as it involves very vulnerable children who are here in Europe right here, right now.

I have some questions for the Minister. If the discussions have started, as he suggests, there must be an idea of the numbers, because there cannot be meaningful discussions unless there is some idea of how many children are involved. What is the broad number that the Government are looking at? The original Dubs amendment included a figure of 3,000. What figure are the Government at least discussing at the moment?

The second question is when. I absolutely agree that seven months is too long for children. There is an urgency here. We are all focused on the 10,000 children who according to Europol have gone missing. Those children are very vulnerable and in great danger. Seven months is a very long time in the life of a child, especially one who has gone through such circumstances.

Finally, what are the funding arrangements? It strikes me that the current scheme is working well because resources are being provided to local authorities and others to make sure that it beds in and that families are supported and welcomed and have the resources and facilities that they need.
[Keir Starmer]

What are the numbers, when will the children arrive and what are the funding arrangements?

James Brokenshire: I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman for his comments on how we have sought to implement the scheme. As I have already indicated, we intend to follow the same approach in taking these measures forward and effecting them appropriately, with the best interests of the child in place. We are not looking to delay, and I hope we will make positive progress in the months ahead.

On numbers, the hon. and learned Gentleman will be aware that the amendment, which is now part of the Immigration Bill, says that we need to consult local authorities to establish what is termed the “specified number”. Although I recognise the desire for clarity, it is important to have that consultation first, to meet the requirements of the legislation. I do not want to prejudge the consultation but to get the numbers from it.

As for when, that will clearly be informed by the consultation, but, as I have indicated, we are not looking to delay. We want to make progress quickly in the weeks and months ahead. We are discussing funding across Government. The hon. and learned Gentleman will be aware that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are already funded when they arrive in the UK, and there are clear funding arrangements for local authorities. We need to be cognisant of that. We will look closely at implementing the scheme in a manner consistent with a number of existing arrangements.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): This morning we are being challenged on the speed of the scheme. We have asked an awful lot of the Government and they have delivered; I am very proud that they have listened to us. I understand that turning passion and heart into practical steps takes time and co-ordination with other bodies. I would much rather encourage Ministers than berate them, and ask, for example, what can I do? What can we do as MPs to speed things up so that Ministers are not on their own in delivering this scheme?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. For highlighting the contribution that can be made. An example could be to have discussions with local authorities about capacity issues within the system, the availability of fostering and other support that may be provided. Indeed—as we have sought to do in implementing the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme—we should harness and channel offers of goodwill and support positive implementation, so that when children arrive they have the care, support and assistance that all Members of this House would want to see.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Scottish National party welcomes the Government’s change of position on this issue, as we did last night. We very much support the idea that efforts should be made to get these children here as quickly as possible. We are concerned, however, about the funding arrangements for local authorities. I asked the Minister about that in the debate last night, and the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has asked him, but we have not had a clear answer. Rather than simply describing the current arrangements, will the Minister give us more detail? Local authorities in Scotland are considering how to respond to the particular challenge of dealing with vulnerable unaccompanied children. They have already responded admirably to the Syrian resettlement scheme, and as a result have received 700 refugees since October—more are arriving each month—but there is particular concern about how the children are to be supported.

Along with the Local Government Association, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has been encouraging the UK Government to ensure that the resettlement of unaccompanied children is adequately resourced, in the same way as the Syrian resettlement scheme, but taking into account the particular demands of vulnerable unaccompanied children. Will the Minister give a commitment that the scheme will be properly funded, and will he give us some idea of what he is going to do about funding it rather than simply describing existing arrangements?

James Brokenshire: It is important to recognise that we are likely to be dealing with two distinct groups. First, there are those with extended family within the UK. As they already have family here, the pressures that might otherwise be felt—on fostering, for example—will be different from those that relate to children who are being resettled on the basis of their risk of exploitation or abuse. We need to discuss those details with local government, as well as with the different Governments with whom we are engaging. Funding is linked to that, which is why we need to hold those conversations. The Home Office already provides funding for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and I assure the hon. and learned Lady that we will be talking to the Scottish Government, and to local authorities in Scotland as well as in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, so that this is seen as a contribution that we are making as the United Kingdom.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his clear enunciation of Government policy, and this must be seen within the context of the wider refugee arrangements. He will know that in September last year, the Prime Minister gave an undertaking that cognisance would be taken of religious persecution in the middle east, and the systematic slaughter of Coptic Christians, Yazidis and the wider Christian community. Will he reassure the House that a methodology will be put in place to take those issues on board when considering the settlement of child refugees?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend takes me to the implementation of the “children at risk” resettlement scheme, and the new arrangement under which 3,000 people from the region around Syria will be resettled over the next four years. That is not focused specifically on Syrian nationals; all nationals will fall within its scope, which I hope reassures my hon. Friend of the Government’s continuing commitment.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): On 14 April I asked the Minister how many children in France who had applied for asylum or family reunion had been admitted to the UK, and he told me that the data are not held in a way that allows them to be reported on automatically. I am certain that in preparation for last
night’s debate and today’s urgent question, he is aware of those data. Will he tell the House how many children with family have already been admitted, how many have applied, and whether those children with family who have leave to remain in the UK can be admitted before the school term starts in September?

James Brokenshire: As I said in my opening statement, we have accepted more than 30 transfer requests since February, and more than 20 children have already arrived. We will continue to work closely with the French Government over further transfer requests, and to support them with the identification of children who are not already in the system. On transparency, I will be looking carefully at how we can update the public and the House on our progress, just as we have done for the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for coming to the Chamber today and for all his work. I am also grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) and those in the Department for International Development who have helped to deal with this crisis, which keeps going on and on. It is important to ensure that the right support is in place for those children when they come to this country, but does the Minister agree that we must also ensure that we do not play any part in encouraging people trafficking, or in encouraging children to make that perilous journey across the Mediterranean?

James Brokenshire: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, which is why the programme will apply only to children who were registered in the EU prior to 20 March when the EU-Turkey deal came into effect. We must be careful not to add to an already difficult problem, and ensure that we send out that clear message to confront people traffickers and those who seek to exploit children.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): How quickly does the Minister think that the authorities should be able to turn around a case involving a vulnerable child in the European Union who has links to the UK, so that they can be provided with sanctuary? Should they be granted five-year humanitarian protection when they arrive? We do not need placatory words from the Minister; we need a decisive action plan with a clear timetable.

Mr Speaker: Order. There would be no discourtesy if the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) felt the need to leave the Chamber to put her device in order. She mentioned that she thought her phone was switched off, but in my experience, the right hon. Lady is never switched off.

James Brokenshire: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As I said last night, we are carefully analysing the nature of the grant of leave that should be given, and there is a distinction between those who are joining family, and those who are being resettled because of vulnerability. We are holding conversations with the UNHCR to ensure that we strike the right balance, and reflect on what we have done for other schemes, such as the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme where a five-year grant is given.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I very much welcome the Minister’s statement. I pay tribute to him for all his hard work on this matter and for the work he continues to do. Colchester stands ready to play its part, as we have done in the past and look forward to doing in the future. I urge him to do all he can to speed up the process and ensure we help as many of the vulnerable, unaccompanied children as possible, as soon as possible.

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the commitment he gives on behalf of Colchester. We will follow up on all offers of support from local authorities. As I indicated, we have already contacted the Local Government Association, and we will be making contacts through strategic migration partnerships and with local authorities directly. We will be getting on with this.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): The Government seem to give the impression that for people coming to Britain there is a very fast track and a very slow track, which is exemplified today with vulnerable children. People in my constituency believe the fast track is when Mike Ashley of Sports Direct sends for 500 agency workers to work on zero-hours contracts and they are here in the flash of an eye. My right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) has been at the forefront of the campaign to try to get these vulnerable children in. Let us have a little bit more energy on the slow track!

James Brokenshire: I fear the hon. Gentleman may have strayed into the wrong debate. We have shown our commitment clearly through our work on the vulnerable person resettlement scheme and by taking firm action so that children and vulnerable adults come to this country quickly, while dealing with safeguarding and the best interests of the child. I will take no lectures from the hon. Gentleman.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I commend the Minister for the huge effort he and his team at the Home Office have put in. I have a specific question from the many people in Northumberland who are keen to help. They have shown a real willingness to be a part of the scheme to bring in the most vulnerable children who need protection. How can they become foster carers and ensure that they are able to take all children in need, as well as the many children in Northumberland who already need a home?

James Brokenshire: The Children’s Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Edward Timpson) is sitting alongside me on the Government Front Bench. He and I recognise that there is a further opportunity to encourage people to come forward to become foster parents. It takes about nine months to train as a foster parent. On teenagers and issues of specific vulnerability, if people can come forward to their local councils and say that they want to become a foster parent, that would do an awful lot to assist not
just with the implementation of this scheme but with ensuring vulnerable children in this country receive the love, care and assistance we all want them to receive.

**Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC):** Wales is waiting to welcome refugee children. Will the Minister commit to working with the Children’s Commissioner for Wales to ensure that she is properly empowered to support refugee children and Welsh local authorities without delay?

**James Brokenshire:** As I have indicated, we want our response to reflect the whole of the United Kingdom, including Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. I will certainly commit to contacting all relevant agencies in all the countries of the UK to give effect to that.

**Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con):** It is clearly important that we treat as a matter of urgency the arrangements for these children. However, as the recent bombing of the Syrian refugee camp has shown, we must not lose sight of the main thrust of Government policy, which is to bring people from those dangerous camps. Will the Minister reassure the House that that remains the thrust of Government policy?

**James Brokenshire:** We are very clear that we believe we can make the biggest difference in the region, which is why we have committed £2.3 billion of aid and focused on resettlement schemes from the region. Peace and stability in Syria and the extended area are therefore absolutely pivotal. We recognise the needs of children in Europe, which is why we have already acted and why we are taking further action through the steps we are now outlining.

**Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab):** The poorest areas in this country, whose services are already overburdened, take a grotesquely disproportionately high number of asylum seekers, while rich areas, including the constituencies of the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Home Secretary, take none. What are we going to do to improve public acceptability so that more children can be brought into places of refuge and to ensure that the system is fair? It is a question not just of money but of capacity. What are we going to do to improve public acceptability so that more children can be brought into places of refuge and to ensure that the system is fair? It is a question not just of money but of capacity. This great burden is being taken on by the system is fair? It is a question not just of money but of public acceptability so that more children can be brought into places of refuge and to ensure that the system is fair? It is a question not just of money but of capacity.

**Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con):** I, too, thank the Minister for his comments and his hard work over many months—not just in recent times. I am glad we are focusing on putting the right resources in place on the ground, but will he assure me that areas and counties such as Kent and Medway, which have experienced pressures over the last 12 months, will not be pressured to take further young people, given their existing burden?

**James Brokenshire:** I am aware, from my discussions with the leader of the council and other hon. Members, of the pressures that Kent has experienced over many months. I can assure my hon. Friend that the new mechanisms and statutory underpinning of a national dispersal arrangement for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children will address those pressures and ensure that Kent and other councils experiencing such pressures are not overburdened, as they have been.

**Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab):** I commend the excellent work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) in leading the campaign on this issue and welcome the Government’s new approach, but may I ask the Minister, who has talked about transparency, why he has refused to answer my right hon. Friend’s parliamentary questions and the freedom of information request? In particular, we want to know the number of applications being made so that we can judge how quickly the Government are acting.

**Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con):** I commend the Minister for his significant and long-standing commitment—it did not just start with the consideration of the Dubs amendment—to work for the best interests of lone children. Can he confirm that the lead he is taking in relation to additional expertise in Calais and the imminent dispatch of 75 experts to Greece is resulting in family reunions being expedited and that that will continue in the coming weeks? On transparency, can the results be published alongside the quarterly statistics?

**James Brokenshire:** As I have just indicated, I will consider further what information can be provided so that people can assess how the Government are progressing. When I was in Athens on Friday, I discussed directly how the experts we wanted to be deployed in the coming weeks could be used effectively and could bring a focus on issues of vulnerability, exploitation and support for vulnerable children.

**Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab):** The Minister says that we cannot get 300 children here in time for the start of the school term because he needs to consult local authorities, but that is why, a calendar month ago in the House, following my conversations with leaders on Merseyside, I asked him whether he had spoken to local authority leaders about educational needs for
children coming here. He said then that he had, so will he confirm that consultation with local authorities started at least a month ago?

**James Brokenshire:** If the hon. Lady looks at the legislation—the amendment was approved last night—she will find that it imposes a legal duty on the Government to carry out that consultation on the basis of the revised arrangements on resettlement from Europe that we have accepted. We need to look closely at that. It extends from the work on child resettlement from the region. There are pressures on fostering, children’s centres, mental health and other facilities. We want to get this right, but there should be no imputation that we are delaying in doing so.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): I have been contacted by constituents about this issue, as have many other Members. Some have said that they would be prepared to provide a placement for one of the refugees being resettled in this country. What work will be done to take up some of those offers? If they are not suitable for this programme, will the Minister consider whether they might be suitable for wider fostering placements, given the need for them?

**James Brokenshire:** I thank my hon. Friend and others for indicating the support from their communities. My hon. Friend may be interested to know that we continue to work closely on this. The Under-Secretary of State for Refugees, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) and the Home Secretary are looking closely at the community sponsorship mechanism that might provide new means for recognising children and others fleeing persecution who might be able to come to this country. I hope to be able to update the House on this shortly.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I have just been reminded by the hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) that today is the 76th anniversary of Winston Churchill becoming Prime Minister. I note in passing, despite the absence—the relatively rare absence—of the hon. Member in question from the Chamber, that today is also the 76th birthday of the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). [Interruption.] I recover your composure, Mr Doughty.

**Stephen Doughty:** I was taken aback by your encyclopaedic knowledge, Mr Speaker.

Citizens Cymru in Cardiff and the Vale has been very clear about the need to take urgent action on this issue. It wants to know from the Minister whether we are talking about a ballpark figure of 300? I understand that he will not give us a specific number, but is this the sort of figure involved, which Citizens Cymru and the Archbishop of Canterbury have asked for? The Minister has talked about the best interests of the child and I agree with him absolutely on that, but does he agree, given the conditions that we have heard of some of these children are in, that seven months is unlikely to be in the best interests of the child?

**James Brokenshire:** I have already responded and made it clear that we will make progress during the course of the year. That does not mean that we are waiting seven months to do so. I underline that very clear message once again. I appreciate the desire for clarification on numbers and expectations, but I underline again that we need to do so in consultation with local authorities. That is what the Bill says; that is what we will do.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I very much support the pragmatic and responsible position outlined by the Minister on unaccompanied children, but does it not assert a worrying incapacity, particularly on the part of France and its structures, for maintaining the safety and security of vulnerable children?

**James Brokenshire:** The main point at issue is the children who have family here in the UK and how we can work speedily with the French Government to ensure that they are reunited with their family members here. We have been engaged in that work, but we have also supported the French Government on improving the conditions in and around the camps in northern France. We will continue to support them in their endeavours.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I want to push the Minister a bit more on the resources that will be required—not just for the speedy identification, processing and resettlement, but for the support that the children will need in the communities that they finally make their home. Many will almost certainly need educational support, but they might also need mental health and counselling support, too. What resources will the Minister make available for the child refugees?

**James Brokenshire:** That is precisely why we need further consultation with local government—to identify the pressures that will need to be satisfied. It is also why I have highlighted the different issues involved in these children rejoining a family, so that they can receive the support, love and care that they need from an established family group. As I have said, we need to look at this very carefully in the light of the best interests of the child.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): I believe strongly that Ministers have been right all the way through to say that we should not incentivise or encourage perilous sea journeys. It is clear that other countries in the region should be doing more, so what pressure are Ministers putting on those countries to do that—not least to stop criminal gangs and traffickers being able to paint this as an opportunity?

**James Brokenshire:** As my hon. Friend may know, we have established an organised immigration crime taskforce to strengthen our own knowledge, intelligence and action against the smugglers and people traffickers, working with Europol and at a European Union level to retain focus on confronting the smuggling networks. That is allowing us to work with other European countries to take firm action not just close to our shores, but further afield.
Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Will the Minister guarantee that children whose families are already in the United Kingdom will be cleared in time for them to start school in September? Will he also agree to publish a timetable showing when unaccompanied children in Europe can come here?

James Brokenshire: As I have said, we want to make rapid progress. We are already taking children with family connections to the United Kingdom from France, and we want to find ways of improving the process further so that, when cases are identified, we can take charge and ensure that those children come to the UK quickly. There are vulnerable children in Italy and Greece, which is precisely why we are opening a dialogue with those countries. We want to understand their systems properly, and join up with them effectively so that we can identify such children and act to enable them to come to this country.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): The Minister has spoken about the extra 75 staff who will help with child refugee resettlement. What will be the role of those staff, what will be the timescale for their deployment to help identify vulnerable children, and how will this move help to speed up the process?

James Brokenshire: Some of the 75 experts whom we have offered to the European Asylum Support Office to contribute to its endeavours in connection with the EU-Turkey deal will help with processing. Others will be translators. We have also offered medical support, as well as officers who will be able to identify vulnerability issues. I had conversations with EASO about this when I was in Athens on Friday. We have identified the people concerned, and we want them to be deployed quickly—within, I hope, a matter of weeks.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): We now come to the statement on key stage 2 tests. Before I call the Minister for Schools, I should inform the House that the Speaker had granted an urgent question to the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), but the hon. Gentleman has withdrawn it in the light of the Government’s offer to make a statement on the matter.

Key Stage 2 Tests

11.17 am

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): With permission, I will make a statement about key stage 2 tests.

Last night the Department for Education was made aware of an issue involving the key stage 2 English grammar, punctuation and spelling test, which was mistakenly uploaded on to a secure website by Pearson. Pearson is the external marking supplier contracted by the Department to mark the tests.

At this stage, we know that the test was mistakenly uploaded at about 5 o’clock yesterday evening. It was uploaded on to a secure site, which was not accessible to anyone without approval from Pearson. Pearson was informed that the test was on its site by markers during the course of the evening, and removed the material from the site at 9.30 pm. The Department was separately alerted to the situation at about 9.30 pm by the media, and contacted Pearson immediately to establish the facts. Pearson’s records show that during the short period when the materials were live, 93 markers—all with the appropriate clearance—accessed the material.

It is worth emphasising that the only people with access to the site are contracted markers, all of whom are under a contractual obligation not to share sensitive information. I should also point out that it is standard and appropriate practice for key individuals to be given prior access to assessment material in order to ensure that the delivery of tests and marking of papers can occur in a smooth and timely way. Some 23 senior markers had access to the material from 1 April, and 153 team leaders had access to the material from 11 April.

Clearly, in this system, it is essential that people in positions of trust can be relied on to act appropriately. Unfortunately, in this case, it appears that one person could not, and leaked the key stage 2 English grammar, punctuation and spelling test to a journalist. I have spoken to Rod Bristow, the president of Pearson UK, this morning to ask for a full explanation of how this mistake occurred. He has accepted full responsibility for the error and has committed to investigating the matter quickly and fully.

Specifically, I have asked Rod Bristow to look at two issues. First, how did the material come to be uploaded on to the secure site in error? This was clearly a mistake which should not have been possible. Secondly, I have asked that all records be examined and all information interrogated so that the culprit who leaked this sensitive information can be identified. I am satisfied that Pearson understands the seriousness of the issue and the need to take action quickly to provide clear and unequivocal answers to these two questions. Once I have this information, I will consider what action it may be appropriate to take. I will explore the full range of options available to the Department, including looking at contractual and other routes to seek redress.

I would like to reiterate that we have no evidence to suggest that any sensitive information entered the public domain before children started taking the test today, and the tests are going ahead as planned. My officials were monitoring social media and other platforms through the night and found no sign of materials being made
available. The journalist in question took the decision not to publish the test papers and I am grateful to him for that. Although this is a serious breach—and I am determined to get to the bottom of how the error occurred—it is clear that the actions of almost every marker involved have been correct and proper, and that the integrity of the tests has not been compromised. Teachers and schools should have confidence in the content of the tests and in the processes underpinning the administration of the tests in schools and the subsequent marking.

I would like to make a few comments about the wider context of primary assessment. I acknowledge that there have been errors in the administration of tests this year. While it is important that we address those errors, they should not detract from the central importance of testing in the life of a school. Tests are an appropriate and essential way for us to understand how well schools are doing, and where more support needs to be targeted so that every child is given the best possible opportunity to succeed throughout their time in school and to get the best preparation for adult life.

We have taken clear action to strengthen the primary curriculum, to ensure that children today are being taught the fundamentals of literacy and numeracy that are vital for their future success. There are some who say that tests are inherently wrong, that we should not test children and that we are creating a regime that is overly stressful. I disagree. Yesterday, ComRes released a poll of 750 10 and 11-year-old pupils for the BBC, in which 62% of pupils responded that they either “don’t mind” or “enjoy” taking the tests. That is far more than those who said that they “don’t like” or “hate” taking the tests. Altogether, more of the polled pupils reported that they “enjoy” taking the tests than “hate” them.

Testing is a vital part of teaching: it is the most accurate way, bar none, that a teacher, school or parent can know whether a pupil has or has not understood vital subject content. What is more, the process of taking a test actually improves pupil knowledge and understanding. As such, testing should be a routine and normalised part of school life. When the time for national curriculum assessments comes around, pupils should be entirely accustomed to the process.

I would like to finish by reiterating that the key stage 2 English grammar, punctuation and spelling test remains valid and is going ahead as planned. Teachers, schools, parents and others should have confidence in the test, and it will remain part of the primary assessment system. I commend this statement to the House.

11.24 am

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving me advance sight of his statement. The Government have taken their eye off the ball. Ministers have obsessed for months over a plan for forced academisation, a plan which was never about raising standards and which was self-evidently flawed from the start. Parents did not want or need forced academisation. They made that extremely clear and played a key role in forcing the Government into a humiliating policy U-turn last week, which was confirmed by the Secretary of State in her humiliating statement yesterday. What does matter to parents, however, is having an appropriate and supportive assessment regime for their child. They want to know how their child is performing at school, how they can help to close any gaps in their knowledge and how they can support them to do their best.

The Government have let parents down at every step of the way. Today's debacle is just the latest in a sorry line of chaos in primary assessment. First, with no proper consultation with parents, school leaders or teachers, the Government scrapped the assessment system of levels in schools with no regard to what would replace it, creating significant uncertainty and anxiety among the professionals delivering the primary curriculum. It created confusion for parents, with many schools simply attempting to reintroduce their own watered-down version of levels assessment that failed to adequately articulate exactly how well children were getting on. Ministers were then forced to push back the deadline for primary assessments after failing to deliver the necessary resources for teachers in time.

Following that came the embarrassment of the Government's failure to introduce baseline assessment. By rushing ahead with the policy without properly involving professionals or parents, the Government failed to spot the fundamental flaw in the design, which was that the tests that they had developed were insufficiently comparable. As a result, they were forced to abandon their approach to baseline tests entirely. Furthermore, just three weeks ago, we learned that the key stage 1 spelling and grammar test had been accidentally published online in December 2015 as a practice paper. Answers to parliamentary questions show that it was downloaded more than 18,000 times before Ministers realised that there was an issue. As a result, the Government were forced to cancel the test, invalidating the work of many children, teachers and parents.

There has been a constant stream of chop and change in primary assessment under this Government. Since September, the Department for Education has updated or clarified on average at least one primary school assessment resource every other working day. The situation has become so ludicrous that the Department is now having to start clarifying its clarifications. Without a doubt, the confusion and chaos created in primary assessment has led to a damaging fall in confidence among parents and teachers about the reliability and validity of assessment in schools.

As 10 and 11-year-olds are sitting down to take the key stage 2 spelling and grammar test this morning, we now learn that the test has already been published online. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, to lose one test may be regarded as a mistake, but to lose both looks like carelessness. It could not be made up. It is a serious breach on top of a series of multiple failures. How on earth can parents have confidence in the assessment regime when the Department for Education has completely lost control of the tests for which it is responsible? How can we be confident that the rest of the test process is secure?

Remember, the tests are not only important for individual pupils, but part of the performance data by which schools are judged. We can have no confidence in their being used for that purpose after what we have heard today.

The National Association of Head Teachers is right to say:

“We cannot see how school level results can be published or a national benchmark set on such shaky data.”
Headteachers and parents deserve a firm guarantee from the Minister today that no primary school will be forced to become an academy on the basis of these compromised tests. It is time for him to be honest with them, honest with himself and—[Interruption.] The reality is that parents, school leaders and teachers have lost confidence in this Government’s approach to assessment and exams. It is time for the Minister to be honest with them, honest with himself and honest with us. He needs to hold up his hands, admit that he has got it wrong and stop trying to blame others for his Department’s mistakes. It is time for him to engage properly with parents and teachers to establish an approach to primary assessment that has everybody’s confidence and not just his. He needs to look into the eyes of all those 10 and 11-year-olds who are taking the tests today and say sorry for getting it wrong and sorry for letting them down. After all, that is what we teach children to do: admit their mistakes, apologise for them, learn from them and move on. So will he now learn his lesson and turn his attention away from the misguided obsession with structures at the expense of raising standards in schools? Will he turn his focus and his energy on what really matters to parents, and get this right?

**Mr Gibb:** I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin)—or should I say the Lady Bracknell from Scunthorpe. I have to say to him that this Government are committed to raising standards in schools. Given the way the Opposition address this issue, I sometimes wonder whether they are as committed to raising standards as we are. In 2011, we conducted a review of the primary curriculum to ensure that it was closer to the curriculums being taught in the most successful education systems in the world. The review was overseen by the national curriculum review panel, which was made up of highly experienced headteachers and teachers in this country. We introduced the phonics check to ensure that six-year-olds were learning to read properly, and as a consequence of that reform 120,000 six-year-olds are reading more effectively today. We reviewed the reading curriculum—the English curriculum—to ensure that children became fluent readers who developed a habit of reading for pleasure. We reformed the maths curriculum so that children learn how to perform long multiplication by year 5 and long division by year 6, and so that they know their multiplication tables—up to 12 by 12—by heart by the end of year 4. Under the last Labour Government, one in three pupils were leaving primary school still unable to read, write and add up properly. Our Government are determined to address those issues.

Let me address some of the issues the hon. Gentleman raised. He talked about the removal of levels, but level descriptors were only ever intended to be used for the end of key stage statutory assessments, and yet over time came to dominate all assessment and teaching practice. That had a damaging impact on teaching and failed to give parents an accurate understanding of how their children were doing at school. The removal of levels allowed classroom assessment to return to its real purpose of helping teachers evaluate pupils’ knowledge and understanding of curriculum content. When we introduced the reception baseline in September last year, we said we would carry out a comparability study to establish whether it was fit for purpose. The study is now complete, and it has shown that the three different assessments being used by schools this year are not sufficiently comparable for us to create a fair starting point from which to measure pupils’ progress. We remain committed to the assessment of pupils in reception, and over the coming months we will be considering options for improving these assessment arrangements for beyond 2016-17. We will engage teachers, school leaders and parents in that work.

The hon. Gentleman brought up the spelling test. The investigation has uncovered further weaknesses in some of the Standards and Testing Agency’s clearance processes. I initiated that investigation, and the STA is now taking appropriate management action with the members of staff involved. We have already reviewed and tightened up the publication clearance processes.

This is a Government who are committed to reviewing the curriculum and to raising academic standards in our schools. This was always going to be a challenging month as schools got used to the new, more demanding curriculum and the new, more demanding assessments that follow that curriculum. I am confident—the Government are confident—that this is the right thing to do to raise academic standards in our schools to prepare young people for life in modern Britain and for an increasingly competitive global economy.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** Parents in Kettering, of whom I am one, want their children, when they leave primary school, to be able to write neatly and legibly, spell correctly, read confidently, be able to add up, take away, multiply and divide, know all their times tables by heart, mix well with other children, realise that they in themselves have lots of potential, and have a thirst for knowledge that they can develop in their secondary school career. To what extent are we achieving that in modern Britain?

**Mr Gibb:** My hon. Friend rightly summarises the issues that we need to address. We need to ensure that we return to a knowledge-based curriculum, and that children become fluent in arithmetic and reading before they leave primary school. I am afraid that, under the previous Labour Government, too many young people left primary school without those skills to equip them for secondary education. I am convinced that our reforms will deliver the objectives that my hon. Friend set out. [Interruption.] The evidence is that 120,000 more six-year-olds are reading more effectively today than they were in 2012, and that 1.4 million more pupils are being taught in good and outstanding schools today than they were in 2010.

**Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab):** Having listened to the Minister today and heard the statement about the U-turn on academies recently, it seems to me that the Department for Education should now be put in special measures. When the Minister cannot even get the basics right in education, what confidence can we have that the Department will get the big issues right?

**Mr Gibb:** As the hon. Lady will know, this process of testing 600,000 pupils is complex. We use contractors, and, on this occasion, an error was made in uploading
that material on to a secure website. We took action swiftly when we discovered that error, as we did when the spelling test was put online three weeks ago. It is how a Government react to these issues that determines their competence, and we acted swiftly on both occasions. This whole approach to testing our six and seven-year-olds and our 10 and 11-year-olds does require an element of trust in those people engaged in the process. We must test and develop the test. A huge number of professionals see the content of these tests many weeks before they go live, and we have to trust those professionals to do their job properly and with integrity. On this occasion, one such professional decided not to act with integrity. I hope that the hon. Lady will take the same view that we do about professionals who act in that inappropriate way.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I entirely agree with my hon. Friend that testing forms an important and crucial part of our education system. If proof were needed that testing is important, one need look no further than the text of the statement that has been circulated in the Chamber today. It says:

“Although this is a serious breach—".

Unfortunately, the word “breach” is spelled incorrectly.

Mr Gibb: Yes, well, I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing out that error, and I will make sure that it is corrected for Hansard.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I speak as a former key stage 2 marker, and I support efficient, effective testing of children, but I do not think that the Government understand what testing is for. The Minister’s statement said that it was for the accountability of schools, but it seems to me that what testing should be about is measuring and developing a child’s learning. That is why we should not put so much emphasis on a national test that is about school accountability and leads to this kind of appalling behaviour from one teacher. We should focus on ensuring that children understand what they are learning and that we get appropriate tests for individual children.

Mr Gibb: I do not disagree with the right hon. Lady. It is important that children are tested frequently, which helps with memory and practice. Schools use informal formative testing as part of the learning process. There is also another purpose of testing, as summative testing for public accountability and to hold schools to account. That is why the key stage 2 assessments, or SATs, were introduced nearly 30 years ago: to hold schools to account. In doing so, we can target school improvement resources on those schools that are not delivering the quality of education that we want for our young people. We need to be able to do that. Children have only one chance at an education and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is committed to ensuring that we have educational excellence everywhere, in every part of the country. To be able to identify those areas and schools that need the extra support, we need external assessment of children as they leave primary school.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): As a parent who has a child who will do key stage 1 this year and another doing key stage 2, I find it absolutely outrageous that an individual has put my child’s chances at risk with this leak. Does the Minister agree that it would be better for the Opposition to bear that point in mind rather than playing politics with children’s testing?

Mr Gibb: I agree with my hon. Friend. As I said, the whole system depends on the integrity of professionals. We need our senior markers to have access to this material weeks before it goes live. We need our test developers to have access to individual questions months before the tests go live. We test these tests with a large number of pupils before we are sure that they have the right degree of demand. A range of people have access to this material long before it goes live in the classroom. If people do not have that professional integrity, there will be problems. We will be investigating to identify the individual and to ensure that Pearson’s processes are tightened up so that this cannot happen again.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Minister needs to move to the bottom of the class, because he must try harder. This is not the first time that tests have been compromised in this academic year; it is the second time on his watch. Will he sincerely apologise to parents, teachers and those pupils who have taken the test today? Will he also assure them and us that every measure that he needs to take will be taken so that this will not happen on a third occasion?

Mr Gibb: I did apologise for the problem with the key stage I spelling test when that material was inadvertently put online. This issue has not damaged the integrity of the grammar, punctuation and spelling test being taken by 600,000 10 and 11-year-olds today. It was put on to a secure website, protected by password and available only to markers, and 93 of those markers examined the material. We have looked on the websites and at social media—officials were doing this work through the night—to see whether there was any compromising of the test. There is no such evidence.

The Standards and Testing Agency is confident that the test has integrity and it will go ahead. This is a complex process of administering these tests for 600,000 pupils every year. This year was always going to be a challenging year, as it is the first to assess the new and more demanding national curriculum that came into force in September 2014 and that schools have had since July 2013. There is therefore an element of controversy to it. We do not apologise for that controversy, because we believe as a Government in raising academic standards in schools. That is what we came into office to achieve.

We are a Government that will achieve and are achieving those high academic standards, but there are some—I assume that there are no such people on the Opposition Benches—who do not necessarily agree with us that it is important to raise academic standards. Somebody decided that their own opinions were more important than their professional integrity, and decided to breach the trust they had been given and the confidentiality contract into which they had entered, and leaked one of those tests to the media.

William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I begin by wishing the thousands of children undertaking their SATs this week the very best of luck. I am sure they are
taking place in classrooms far calmer than our Chamber this morning. If there has indeed been a deliberate leaking of the SATs material, that is very serious. What is my hon. Friend doing to ensure the continued viability of this year’s key stage 2 SATs?

Mr Gibb: Following the problem with the key stage 1 spelling test, we asked the Standards and Testing Agency to go through all the material with a fine-toothed comb to ensure that there were no further problems at either key stage 1 or key stage 2. We have been assured by the chief executive of the Standards and Testing Agency that those tests are safe and secure. Also, I spoke to Rod Bristow, the president of Pearson UK, this morning, and he assures me that Pearson UK is making sure that its processes are secure and tight so that such breaches cannot occur in the future.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Last Wednesday the Prime Minister was not able to tell the House his definition of a modal verb or what the past progressive tense is, or to distinguish a subordinating conjunctive from a co-ordinating conjunctive. I want to give the Minister a second chance. In the sentence “My baby was born in the hospital where my father works”, are the words “where my father works” a preposition phrase, a relative clause, a main clause or a noun phrase?

Mr Gibb: That is a very clever-clever question, but I have learned through bitter experience not to respond to such provocation.

Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it is essential to measure the progress of both the child and the school to identify the gap and how best to fill it?

Mr Gibb: My hon. Friend is right. It is important to measure progress, as well as absolute attainment. One reason why some people regard the assessment this year as challenging is that there are questions in it that previously were not included in the standard test. They were called level 6 tests and were taken separately. We now include those challenging tests within this test so that schools can get credit for the progress of children who start their school with high levels of prior attainment.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Secretary of State appeared before the Education Committee on 27 April and told me that the new testing regime for key stage 1 and key stage 2 had not been handled badly. I, and parents and teachers throughout the country, strongly disagree. Does the Minister accept that his Department’s actions are making the working lives of teachers more stressful and more difficult, and explain how he thinks that will help to solve the already very worrying teacher recruitment crisis?

Mr Gibb: Whenever I have a platform, I talk about how important it is to go into teaching. I say that it is a very important profession. There are more teachers—450,000—in the profession today than there have been in history. There are 13,000 more teachers today than there were in 2010, and 14,000 returners came into the teaching profession last year, which is more than the 11,000 who came in a few years before that. Of course, we want more professionals to come into teaching as the pupil population increases. That is why we have very effective advertising campaigns and why we are spending £1.3 billion on generous bursaries to attract the best graduates into teaching.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I, too, wish all the children doing their exams good luck. I know what that is like, having had three children who went through a state primary school. Tests are an imperative part of school life because we as parents want to know how to plan for our children’s education, and we want the schools to help us see where the gaps are and how our children are doing. Businesses in Taunton Deane would like our children to have better maths qualifications and better writing skills. Under Labour for all those years, education standards sank. Does the Minister agree that our driving force is better education to raise standards, and that tests are an imperative part of that?

Mr Gibb: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have been declining in the programme for international student assessment tables internationally. We have to continually improve our education system, because other countries are not standing still. They are continually improving their education systems, and unless we do the same, we will fall behind. That is why we reviewed the primary curriculum, why we increased the demands and rigour of mathematics and English, and why we are focusing so much on getting every child to become a fluent reader, who not only masters the mechanics early in their education but becomes a regular reader, reading books for pleasure and developing a lifelong love of reading. We have reformed the secondary curriculum, and we have reformed GCSEs so that they are more on a par with the qualifications in the best education jurisdictions in the world. We have also reformed A-levels, responding to the concerns of employers and universities about the standard of undergraduates and employees.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): Returning to the tests, the Minister cannot do them, the Department cannot organise them and schools cannot understand them. Does the Minister agree with the headmaster of a major primary school in my area, Adrian Antell, who wrote to him saying, “The primary assessment system in our schools is nothing short of shambolic...Yet again, the professional judgements of experienced educational professionals is ignored by politicians trying to make a short term political gain”?

Mr Gibb: No, the tests were developed by educational professionals—a huge number of such professionals were involved. A large number of professional educators, headteachers and experienced teachers were involved in the review of the curriculum. The tests assess the ability of schools to deliver the new curriculum. That curriculum is more demanding, and we do not rely on that; it was a deliberate decision to raise academic standards in our primary schools and secondary schools as we respond to an increasingly demanding world and to the concerns of employers, universities and others.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Government made a big song and dance about testing, which they cannot now deliver. This weekend I was in the Wirral
talking to school governors about how to cope with forced academisation, but the Government had already U-turned. The next time the Minister comes to the Dispatch Box with a grand plan to improve education, why should teachers, parents and pupils in the Wirral believe what he has to say?

Mr Gibb: The hon. Lady simply overstates her case. Our plan for reforming the education system was put in place in 2010. We have reviewed the curriculum. That was overseen by a national curriculum review panel of experienced teachers and headteachers. The new curriculum was advised on by a panel of curriculum experts. It was consulted on widely between 2012 and 2013, informally and then formally. It was published in final draft in July 2013, giving schools over a year to prepare for the first teaching of it in September 2014. This has been a carefully planned review and reform of the curriculum. It has been as swift as it can be, because children need the best education possible, as quickly as possible. This is an important reform. This was always going to be a difficult month, as children were assessed for the first time on the new curriculum. However, schools have had a significant amount of material since July 2013, and they are ready—all our surveys have shown that they are confident about teaching the new curriculum.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I hope the Minister will agree that stability is key to a child thriving at primary school. As has been said, however, the Department for Education has changed documents and resources almost every other day recently, and that has been compounded by the disgraceful leak of the tests. Government Members are rewriting history—something the UK Statistics Authority told them to stop doing—because the Labour Government improved standards from 1997 to 2010. I will give the Minister another chance to apologise to teachers, parents and pupils, and to allow teachers to get on with teaching and children to thrive. Apologise!

Mr Gibb: Again, I think the hon. Lady overstates her case. The primary curriculum was published in final form in July 2013, sample questions were available as early as March 2014, and there were later sample questions in 2015. In reference to her point about changes being made to materials on-site, the Standards and Testing Agency has responded to telephone queries from teachers about certain aspects of the curriculum and the sample materials. To help teachers, it reviewed some of that material so that it responded to those concerns. There were other, very minor changes—for example, when, in response to representations from the NAHT, I changed the date on which the STA collected the teacher assessment materials. That decision was taken in response to the concerns expressed. There were real reasons why we wanted the date to be earlier to ensure fairness between the schools that were moderated by the local authority and those that were not. Of course, that required all the documents online to have a date change. The hon. Lady can make a song and dance about these changes, but they were all done for professional reasons by the very experienced professionals of the Standards and Testing Agency, and they were the right thing to do.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Labour Members are most concerned about the fact that this is the second case in a matter of weeks of major pupil testing errors, and that suggests quite strongly that the Government have taken their eye off the ball. How has their preoccupation with enforced academisation affected their ability to monitor their contractors?

Mr Gibb: We monitor contractors very carefully. The Standards and Testing Agency monitors these issues. This error was made by an individual who put the marking scheme and the test papers for one of the tests—the key stage 2 spelling, punctuation and grammar test—on to a secure site 24 hours before they should have done. As soon as one of the markers alerted them to that fact, they took it down. Ninety-three people had seen that material on-site, but all those 93 people were subject to a confidentiality agreement with Pearson, so this is not some widespread breach. We checked to see whether the individual who leaked this to a journalist had succeeded in spreading the test further. We saw no evidence overnight, through social media or other platforms, that some of that material leaked. The Standards and Testing Agency believes that the test has not been compromised, and we are continuing with it. These are very important assessments and this is a very complex operation. I believe that parents, teachers and the public can have confidence in the tests that have been set this week.
Points of Order

11.57 am

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to raise a very serious point of order with the Chair. We know from reports in the press that HS2 Ltd is apparently again facing difficulties on costs, which are being reviewed by no less a person than the Cabinet Secretary, and on issues of connectivity, which has ever been thus since the project was first announced. A serious matter has arisen that I believe is an attempt by the civil servants who are paid for by the taxpayer and who run HS2 Ltd through their agents—very highly paid lawyers, Eversheds—to gag Members of this House. I do not know whether the Chair is aware of this, but the locus standi of no fewer than four Ministers, three Back Benchers and, I believe, even the Speaker has been challenged.

In other words, HS2 Ltd is trying to prevent Members of this House from speaking out for their constituents and bringing information to the other place—to the House of Lords Committee, which will now be deliberating on the scheme. The question that arises is, “What is it afraid of? Why shouldn’t Members of Parliament be able to speak directly about their constituencies and help to try to improve this legislation as it is going through?” Quite frankly, I regard this as an interference with the freedom of speech of Members of this House, and with our ability and right to represent the people who send us here. I ask the Chair and the House authorities to look into this issue, because I believe that on so many counts, HS2 Ltd has been trying to cover up what is happening, or even to gag those who want to speak against the project or improve the project and make greater gains for their constituencies.

It is ironic that Eversheds quoted in its locus standi challenge the 24th edition of “Erskine May”, pages 949 to 950, in support of the proposition that we should be gagged. The section on “Members and Officers of the House disqualified as agents” states:

“No officer or clerk in the service of either House is allowed to transact private business before the House for his emolument or advantage, either directly or indirectly.”

The previous sentence states:

“Members may not be agents, though they can deposit petitions on behalf of parties”.

I hope that there is no implication from Eversheds that any of the Members of Parliament who have made representations on behalf of their constituents on HS2 are “in receipt of emolument or advantage, either directly or indirectly”, but we know that Eversheds certainly is.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I just make it clear that the rules on locus standi are very clear and we are following them to the letter?

Mrs Gillan: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is not a matter of the letter of the law, but the fact that it is wrong to prevent Ministers, Members of Parliament and even the Speaker from informing a Committee of the other House about a project that has been through this House in its first stage.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): On advice, this is a matter that is with the House of Lords at the moment, and therefore the locus standi is a matter for the House of Lords. I suggest that because the right hon. Lady is referring to a matter of privilege, she should write to the Speaker to ask him to have a look at this. I hope that she is happy with that. He will certainly have a look in Hansard at her full explanation in her point of order.
Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses
Act 1847 (Amendment)

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

12.2 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend section 33 of the Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act 1847 to allow local authorities to proscribe, in certain circumstances, the transport of live animals for slaughter abroad via facilities that local authorities control and operate; and for connected purposes.

I introduce this ten-minute rule Bill for a number of reasons. I do not count myself an outright animal rights activist, but I do count myself as a common-sense activist. That said, there are many reasons why we should all have concerns about any act of animal transportation that imposes stress and unnecessary suffering, when the most logical answer is local slaughter and refrigerated transport of carcases to their destination. The Bill is designed not to change the law on the transportation of live animals for breeding or other aspects of animal husbandry, but merely to allow local authorities discretion to decide, in the spirit of localism, whether facilities that they own should be used to transport animals for slaughter abroad. In short, the Bill would make due amendment to section 33 of the Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act 1847 to allow local authority-controlled ports to proscribe, at their discretion, the transport of animals for slaughter abroad.

The primary reason for my interest in the matter is local to my constituency of South Thanet, where we have the active port of Ramsgate. It is on a long-term lease from the Crown Estate, and all port operations are controlled and invoiced by the local authority, Thanet District Council. Following pressure from a shipper, the council acquiesced to legal threats and demands that the port be made available for small vessel roll-on, roll-off operations of just a few lorries carrying livestock. The first such shipment happened on 18 May 2011. Not surprisingly, the transportation attracted a huge amount of local opposition and active campaigning by Kent-wide animal rights activists. The police cost of marshalling such shipments is estimated to be £18,000 per shipment. That is massively more—perhaps by a factor of 10—than the likely profit arising to the shipper.

The regular shipments continued, with local opposition, until what can only be described as a truly appalling event on 12 September 2012. A lorry was loaded with 548 sheep over three tiers, and the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency staff who were on site discovered that it had been poorly loaded and was overstocked. One sheep had a broken leg, others were lame and some had trapped limbs. An order was given to unload the sheep, and a witness of the scene that followed commented that “all hell let loose with nearly 20 people made up of RSPCA, AHVLA”—the veterinary association—“Police and port staff, some with a camera in hand and a paint sprayer in the other chasing over 500 sheep around and apparently trying to find lame ones. In fact it was the chasing on the unsuitable surface that was causing the lameness. During the chase six lambs went into the water resulting in four being rescued by the RSPCA and two being found dead”.

Some 13 hours later, after the arrival of Kent trading standards and news crews, a further 37 sheep were identified as lame and were euthanised on site. That followed a second unloading, after sheep were again found to have trapped limbs. It was described by the local press as simply a “massacre”.

The following day, Thanet District Council unilaterally decided to suspend any further live animal shipments through Ramsgate. This decision was supported by the wider council across all the political parties locally, and of course by local residents. However, legal fears were brought to bear, and following a grant of interim relief in the High Court, shipments resumed a little over a month later, on 19 October 2012.

The shippers then entered the legal fray over a protracted period, which resulted in a High Court judgment on 27 February 2014. During a four-day hearing in December 2013, Thanet District Council relied heavily on section 40 of the Harbours Act 1964, which offers some discretion in relation to port use. Unfortunately, the judgment went against Thanet District Council primarily because of section 33 of the Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act, which states that ports “shall be open to all persons for the shipping and unshipping of goods”.

I am seeking to change that provision through this Bill. The adverse judgment has left local taxpayers—the authority is not a large one—with a compensation bill and costs in excess of £4 million, and it has resulted in the resumption of a trade that nobody wants through a port that is unsuitable. Local residents are appalled that their port is now being used for a trade that they find unnecessary and that many find distinctly abhorrent.

This is the nub of my ten-minute rule Bill: in the true spirit of localism, a long overdue amendment to the 1847 Act would give local authorities a greater degree of certainty that they will not face this type of legal action in future and provide them with an opportunity to object to the use of their municipally operated facilities for such transactions. If only life were that simple, I could bring in a Bill to amend the 1847 Act and if this House agreed to it—if only this House was sovereign and able to do so—that would be the end of the matter. Unfortunately, there is the big boot of the EU to consider, given the protection of free trade and the free movement of goods provided by article 35 of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union. Such protection has been further added to over the years by various European Court judgments, notably Francovich in 1991, and by the Factortame case in the Lords in 2001.

In summary, I am seeking the House’s leave to advance this Bill to its next stage, and, on the assumption that this Parliament is sovereign and can do so, to secure an alteration of domestic law to proscribe such trade in the circumstances that clearly apply to the port of Ramsgate and to Thanet District Council, which controls it. The conclusion of the High Court judgment was rather instructive and quite alarming: in the judge’s words, “the law does not exist only to protect the interests of the popular.”

I would say that this is entirely the foundation of our democracy. The argument about the intervention of EU law in this area is not one for me to make today; it is an argument for another day—possibly 23 June. On that basis, I commend the Bill to the House.
Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I rise to oppose the motion, which was proposed so ably by my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay). I thank him for raising a matter of concern for millions of our fellow citizens. At the time of the events to which he referred, I am sure that I was not alone in receiving communications from constituents, asking that we stop this trade. He is responding to those calls for action, but I want to deal with the elephant in the room—in fact, the two elephants in the room, one of which he touched on briefly.

The first elephant in the room is to do with our proceedings. As we are in the last few sitting days of this Session, even if the motion is passed today there will be no time to consider the Bill further during this Session. Along with the dozens of others that are listed on the Order Paper, it will fall when Parliament prorogues in the next day or two. As the House will be aware, the Procedure Committee, of which I am a member, has put forward proposals to change our procedures to make them more readily understandable to those outside the House.

There is therefore an interesting contrast between the two elephants. It is within our power to do something about the first one. It is in our hands to improve matters, so we can remove the first elephant from the room. The second elephant is the effect on our law of European law, which was touched on briefly by my hon. Friend in moving the ten-minute rule motion. It means that no matter how much we would like to change the sad state of affairs in which we find ourselves, we are powerless to do anything about it.

In the time available today, it is not possible to deal with every single detail of the matter, but I hope that in trying to prove my case to the satisfaction of the House, it will suffice if I quote briefly from the judgment of Mr Justice Birss in the case that arose out of the facts set out by my hon. Friend, the short title of which was Barco de Vapor v Thanet District Council. It is a comprehensive judgment that runs to 192 paragraphs. I will quote from just three of those paragraphs.

Paragraph 8 states:

“The claimants’ case in outline is that the ban amounted to a restriction on the exporting of goods within the European Union in breach of Article 35 TFEU and cannot be justified under Article 36 TFEU or otherwise. One reason it cannot be justified is because the relevant legislation is Regulation EC 1/2005. The claimants contend that the ban is contrary to the Regulation and that since the Regulation exhaustively harmonises the law in the relevant area, the ban cannot be justified under Art 36.”

I should explain for the benefit of those who are not familiar with the acronym TFEU that it refers to the treaty on the functioning of the European Union, which is one of the basic treaties of the European Union that we are subject to.

Let me jump to the very end of the judgment, where the judge delivers his final verdict on the case. At the end of the penultimate 191st paragraph, he says:

“In my judgment TDC are liable to pay damages to compensate the claimants for the losses caused by the breach of Art 35 TFEU.”

There is no mention of the Act that my hon. Friend seeks to amend today.

Finally, let me quote from the final paragraph. My hon. Friend referred briefly to one part of it, but did not read the whole paragraph, which is very instructive indeed. Paragraph 192 reads as follows:

“The animal export trade is not popular. It involves activities which are highly distasteful to many people. However the law does not exist only to protect the interests of the popular. I have found that Thanet District Council did not have the authority to impose the ban which prevented the claimants from using Ramsgate port to export livestock. The ban was an unjustifiable breach of Art 35 of the TFEU. It was a disproportionate decision reached in haste without separate legal advice and breached a fundamental element of the rules governing free trade in the EU. In my judgment the council is liable to pay damages to the claimants.”

There we have it: the final judgment was nothing to do with the 1847 Act—let’s not kid ourselves. It all came down to article 35.

Our constituents will often hear that one of the reasons why those of us who believe that the United Kingdom would be better off if we left the European Union is that our membership means a loss of sovereignty. Unsurprisingly, many people are not all that clear about what that actually means. Is it some sort of technical or theoretical issue that does not really matter? This case brings the whole issue of sovereignty to life. In short, the loss of sovereignty means the loss of power—the loss of power of this House to do anything about certain things. It means that the power of our constituents has been given away; the power that they have entrusted to us to enact legislation on their behalf has been lost.

I believe that we must be open and honest with the country about these matters. There is no point in continuing the pretence that this House has any power to stop these exports by merely amending domestic legislation. Unless we leave the European Union and regain our sovereignty—that is to say, regain the power to control our own affairs—we are simply wasting our time. We are giving the public the false impression that we are able to do something about this matter, when we cannot.

In view of the fact that there is no prospect of the Bill making further progress, I do not wish to divide the House, but I trust that by the time my hon. Friend brings the matter before the House again, voters across the country will have taken the opportunity afforded to them on 23 June to take back control over this matter.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Craig Mackinlay, Sir Roger Gale, Martin Vickers, Kelly Tolhurst, Mrs Flick Drummond, Caroline Lucas, Peter Aldous, Mr Steve Baker and Dr Tania Mathias present the Bill.

Craig Mackinlay accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 May, and to be printed (Bill 176).
Backbench Business

Universal Credit (Children)

12.18 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House notes that, while some aspects of the universal credit system are likely better to support families with children, some groups of children and families are particularly likely to lose out, and many may struggle with elements of the new approaches to payment and administration; further notes that there has been no revised impact assessment to take account of significant cuts to the work allowance; and calls on the Government to re-assess the effect of its policy on universal credit in light of those cuts and to ensure that the number of children in poverty, and particularly those in working families, falls as a result of the introduction of the new universal credit system.

I am extremely grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the opportunity to debate this subject. Once universal credit is in place, it is estimated that about half of all the children in the UK will be in households that are entitled to it at any given time, so it will have a huge impact on children and one that it is important for us to scrutinise.

I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) and the Minister for Employment in their places. I have always enjoyed debating these matters with the Minister, but I often wish she felt as willing to disagree with her right hon. and hon. Friends on her ministerial brief as she is free to disagree with the Prime Minister about Europe. However, I fear I may be disappointed when we come to the end of the debate. I hope that the debate can shed some light on the impact of universal credit on child poverty around the UK.

The Opposition have always recognised that there are significant potential benefits from universal credit: simplifying the system, merging six different benefits into one and, in particular, making it much easier for people to work out the effect on their financial position if they were to move into work—that is difficult at the moment but under universal credit should be simpler. The former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who of course resigned from the Government after the Budget fiasco on disability benefits, is entitled to a good deal of credit for coming up with the original idea and driving it through while he was in the Government.

Unfortunately, however, the right hon. Gentleman is not entitled to very much credit for the way that he implemented universal credit—the Department got itself into a terrible mess, and the Cabinet Office had to step in to sort out a looming IT disaster. The result is that universal credit is now running extremely late. On the original timetable, set out in 2010, transition from the old benefits system to universal credit would now be almost finished, and the whole thing would be complete by next year. In fact, implementation of universal credit is really only just beginning. According to the most recent figures, from March, 225,000 people are receiving universal credit, of whom almost 88,000 are in work.

The initial plan was hopelessly unrealistic, as was pointed out by the Opposition at the time. Unfortunately the Government ignored those warnings. We were told at one stage that 1 million people would be claiming universal credit by April 2014; two years later, we still have not reached a quarter of that number. Things are a little unclear, but it now looks as though the current plan has transition complete by 2022, which is five years later than originally announced.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend think it right and fair that, as a result of the piecemeal roll-out of universal credit, along with the cuts to work allowances, some families could be more than £3,000 a year worse off than they would be if they were in exactly the same financial circumstances but lived in an area where tax credits were still available?

Stephen Timms: No, I do not think that that is fair. There is now a large and growing group of people who are significantly worse off than they would have been because they have the misfortune of being in an area where universal credit is paid instead of tax credits. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to that.

When the universal credit project started in 2011, we were told that it would be completed in six years. Today, five years later, we are being told that it will be completed in another six years, by 2022. Five years into this initiative, its expected completion has been delayed by five years. We are no nearer the end now than we were told we were five years ago.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman was generous in his support of the principle of the scheme. Surely he must accept that it is better to get it right. A steady, phased implementation is the right way to ensure that the benefits to which he referred are properly implemented across the country.

Stephen Timms: Of course that is right. There should have been a sensible timetable and plan from the start. It was pointed out to Ministers that the original plan was unrealistic, but unfortunately they took no notice of that.

It is not just the timetable that has changed, however, but the substance. What is being implemented is now significantly different from what it was originally going to be. A report published last week by the Resolution Foundation has made that very clear; I will refer to that report a number of times in my speech, but at this point I will quote one observation from its executive summary, which says that “the latest series of cuts—announced at last year’s Summer Budget—risk leaving UC as little more than a vehicle for rationalising benefit administration and cutting costs to the Exchequer.” That is at the heart of this debate. Universal credit is now set to be a pale shadow of what Ministers initially announced. The losers, both from the cuts made to the original proposals and from flaws in the original design that have never satisfactorily been addressed, will above all be the nation’s children.

The Resolution Foundation has explained the impact of the £3 billion cut announced last summer: “As initially designed, UC gave broad parity with the current tax credit system... Now, UC will... be less generous than the tax credit system for working families.”
That is what gives rise to the anomaly and unfairness to which my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) drew our attention.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Is my right hon. Friend as shocked as I was to hear that a recent report from the Children’s Society has shown that disabled children will get considerably less money under universal credit, and many will receive only around half of what they currently get under tax credits?

Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is a shocking aspect of what has always been proposed with universal credit—the support for disabled children is being drastically reduced. I hope we will have time to discuss that.

Will the Minister publish an updated version of the impact report for universal credit that was published alongside the 2011 Welfare Reform Bill, which introduced it? I will come back to that, because what is now being introduced is certainly not what the previous Secretary of State had in mind when he launched the universal credit initiative six years ago.

Throughout the last Parliament, Ministers repeatedly said that they were committed to eliminating child poverty, and they cited the introduction of universal credit as key to helping to achieve that. The 2011 impact assessment, which I hope the Minister will update, said that universal credit would reduce child poverty by 300,000. A written answer in January 2013 gave the lower figure of 150,000, half the initial figure of 300,000. We have not had an update since the really big cuts to universal credit announced last summer. That is what I am hoping the Minister will give us.

All of us will recall the furore when the Chancellor announced swingeing tax credit cuts last summer. I pay tribute to those Government Members who, unlike the Chancellor, grasped what those cuts would mean to many hard-working families struggling to make ends meet, such as the family of an ambulance driver earning £20,000 a year, who stood to lose a full £2,000 from the cuts. Thankfully, the Chancellor was forced to abandon those plans. But the equivalent cuts to universal credit—at that time, claimed by hardly anyone in work—went ahead, so the Chancellor’s cuts to tax credits will, over time, be implemented by stealth. Working families on universal credit rather than tax credits saw a big income cut last month, as my hon. Friend the Member for Neath has already pointed out.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is making a strong point about the value of the cuts and the wider impact of the changes. Does he agree that there is a significant challenge with the move from weekly or fortnightly payments to monthly payments? With a week’s processing time for claims, and payments in arrears, that could leave five weeks before people receive claims under universal credit. We are told that there is an advance payment system but Citizens Advice has said that six in 10 clients coming to a citizens advice bureau about universal credit have not been told about it. We could see many people out of pocket and really struggling to get by, through no fault of their own. That can have a huge impact on children.

Stephen Timms: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point, and Citizens Advice points out that this is the biggest practical problem that arises where universal credit has already been introduced. The assumption with universal credit is that people have a monthly pay cheque that will see them through the first month, and that they will receive universal credit at the end of that. However, Citizens Advice suggests that more than half of those claiming are paid weekly, not monthly, and therefore do not have a month’s pay cheque to keep them going for those five weeks. That is causing serious problems.

Will the Minister update the House on what the Government now believe the effect of universal credit will be on child poverty? Given the drastic cuts that we have seen, I believe that implementing universal credit will increase child poverty, rather than decrease it as we were told it would, and as—I have no doubt—was the intention of the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in introducing this radical change.

Some information on that question has been provided by the Institute for Fiscal Studies in its February report, “Living Standards, Poverty and Inequality in the UK: 2015–16 to 2020–21”, which shows relative poverty rates from 1997-98 to 2020-21. It points out that in 1997-98 relative child poverty—which was inherited by the incoming Labour Government—stood at 27%. By 2010-11 when that Government were replaced, that figure was down to between 17% and 18%. The statutory target enshrined in the Child Poverty Act 2010—which I took through the House with all-party support—was 10% by 2020, but after 2010 the level of child poverty flattened for a number of years, and it is now starting to rise. Under the IFS projection, by 2020 it will be virtually back up to the catastrophic level inherited by the Blair Government in 1997. As the IFS states in its report “the projected increases over the next few years simply reverse the large falls seen under Labour.”

It is interesting to contrast that with what the IFS says about pensioner poverty. Like child poverty, pensioner poverty in 1997 was at a high level—around 27%—but the policies of the Labour Government reduced that to around 17%, and that level remained fairly stable throughout the previous Parliament from 2010 to 2015. The future trajectory for pensioner poverty suggests that it will not rise and will carry on at around 17%. By contrast, child poverty will rocket back up to the levels of 1997. Under the IFS projection, the rate of child poverty in families with more than three children will be more than 30% by 2020.

The huge cuts announced to universal credit will come about by reducing the income of working families with children—a lot of families will be much worse off not only compared with what they would have received under the tax credit system, but in comparison with what they would have received if the original universal credit proposals had gone ahead. The Child Poverty Action Group highlights problems for lone parents and states that “lone parents will be hit particularly hard, and stand to lose…around £554 per year if renting, or over £2,600 per year if not…The children of single parents are already at twice the risk of living in poverty as those in couple families, and this will exacerbate their disadvantage.”

Cuts to universal credit will drastically reduce the income of working families, and just as big a worry is that incentives for unemployed parents to get into work
will be much weaker under current proposals for universal credit than originally intended. That was spelt out by the Resolution Foundation in its report, which states:

“These cuts don’t just affect incomes, they also undermine the scheme’s incentives structure… Returns to entering work are much lower than anticipated under the earlier design of UC.”

It warns that parents—particularly lone parents—will find the incentives to work more hours very weak, and many will reduce their hours for a very small income drop.

Christina Rees: Does my right hon. Friend agree that guidance from the DWP that instructs people to work an extra 200 hours a year for no extra money, to make up the thousands of pounds a year that families are set to lose as a result of cuts to universal credit, is unacceptable?

Stephen Timms: Yes, the suggestion that people can make up those losses simply by working more hours is unrealistic in many circumstances. The Resolution Foundation also points out:

“For second earners in couples the situation may be worse still, with increasing numbers potentially deciding not to enter work at all.”

The whole point of universal credit was supposed to give people incentives to be in employment—indeed, yesterday the Secretary of State reiterated that point at questions to the DWP. The problem is that as currently proposed, those incentives will not be in place when universal credit is rolled out.

Let me draw the Minister’s attention to an article that was published last month and written by Deven Ghelani, who was one of the original architects of universal credit at the Centre for Social Justice. He describes the cuts to universal credit work allowances that were introduced on 11 April as

“undermining the original intent of Universal Credit—to make work pay… The Government should maintain support for work incentives within Universal Credit… these cuts to work allowances will not help to make work pay for low earners.”

That is a deep problem with what is now proposed.

The Minister will argue that calculations of child poverty—the reduction in child poverty of 300,000 that was announced by the Government in the original impact assessment for the legislation, and the subsequent written answer estimate of 150,000—do not allow for the dynamic effects of universal credit and of encouraging people into jobs. In his article, Deven Ghelani addresses exactly that point and states:

“Lower work allowances will limit the dynamic effect of Universal Credit and… will make it harder for households to make up their shortfall by working additional hours.”

That point was also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Neath.

Stephen Doughty: I am sure that my right hon. Friend has had the experience of meeting many constituents who have to make agonising decisions when making up shortfalls in their income, particularly when it comes to children, whether for basics such as food and school clothes, or modest birthday presents. Sometimes that will force people down the route of getting into further debt, which further compounds their situation. We have seen the horrors of payday loan companies, and others, and many families will find themselves in difficult situations, particularly during that transition period, and they may end up getting further into debt.

Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is right, and Citizens Advice made exactly that point about the change to support for disabled children that my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) referred to. A large proportion of those affected say that they will have to cut back on food, and are likely to get into debt as a result of the cuts.

Deven Ghelani refers to “the challenges that arise from weakening work incentives within this Government’s flagship welfare reform.”

The Minister will understand why that is a problem, given what the Government have been telling us for years about what universal credit was going to do.

The IFS’s projections for dramatically rising levels of child poverty over the next few years are not only about universal credit; other factors also have an impact. As far as I can see, however, the projections are consistent not with universal credit reducing child poverty—we were originally told it would reduce child poverty—but with universal credit increasing child poverty. It is low-income families and children who will bear the brunt of the cuts, while older and better off people will not be affected at all. I press the Minister to tell us the Government’s current estimate of the effect of the implementation of universal credit on the child poverty figures.

That is the big picture impact of universal credit, but there are a number of other aspects of its design that I want to touch on. I will try to do so very briefly. The first aspect is the eligibility of universal credit claimants to free school meals. At the moment, entitlement to so-called “passported benefits” is dependent on receiving means-tested, out-of-work benefits. That simple test is no longer available in universal credit, because the benefit does not indicate whether the claimant is working or not—indeed, that is one of the advantages of universal credit. The Government therefore have to devise a new eligibility test.

There has been discussion about how, instead of free school meals, claimants could be given cash which could be tapered away with the rest of their universal credit payment. The problem, however, is that we know much of the cash would not be spent on school meals but on something else. There is a real danger of the school meal system collapsing. The Government have rightly rejected that option. We could envisage an electronic system, where claimants are given credits that could be used only to buy school meals. Those, too, could be tapered, but currently there is no IT system in place to do that. The Welfare Reform and Work Bill Committee asked about this during pre-legislative scrutiny in 2011. The Secretary of State at the time told us we would have an answer before the Bill gained Royal Assent in summer 2011. Five years later, we still have not had an answer. Ministers often tell us it is a matter for the Department for Education. The problem is this: the way this question is answered is crucial to whether universal credit will achieve its goal.

It has been hinted that free school meals eligibility will depend on a family’s income being below a particular threshold. The huge problem with that is that it would introduce an almost impossible cliff edge into the benefit system, which is exactly the kind of perverse incentive that universal credit is intended to remove. In fact, it would be far worse than any of the perverse incentives
currently in the system. If one’s income is just below the threshold—whatever it may be—the last thing you would want is any kind of pay rise or hours increase that would cause you to lose, overnight, the benefit of free school meals for your children. With three children, well over £1,000 a year could be lost.

What is the answer? I recognise that this is a genuinely difficult issue. I do not criticise Ministers for the fact that it is difficult, but I do criticise Ministers for the fact that five years later we still do not have an answer. Increasingly, it seems to me that the viable solution, albeit quite a costly one, will be to extend the current temporary solution that free school meals should be made available to everyone who claims universal credit whether they are in work or not. I ask the Minister when it is likely that we will get a decision on this issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles drew attention to the severity of the proposed cuts to the incomes of disabled children through universal credit. The tax credit support of about £60 a week will be cut to £29 a week. I think all of us can see that for an estimated 100,000 families with disabled children that will be a dramatic reduction in their income. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) drew attention to the problems with the long delay between someone making a claim for universal credit and receiving the money. The assumption that people will have a month’s pay cheque in the bank to keep them going in the meantime is proving to be unfounded. The Trussell Trust published its annual statistics last month, which show another increase in food bank demand in the past year. It notes: “In some areas food banks report increased referrals due to delays and arrears in Universal Credit payments.”

Will the Minister look again at the administrative arrangements for universal credit, as it seems the current arrangements will be a serious problem for many families with children?

The final point I want to raise is that at the moment local authorities pay housing benefit. They can see which claimants will be hit by cuts to benefits of various kinds and provide additional help and tailored support. That is what we have seen in practice. Under universal credit, however, the payment will be made by the DWP. Local authorities will no longer have the data about people’s circumstances. Will the Department provide that data, which it will have instead of local authorities, to local authorities so they will be in a position to continue to provide the kind of tailored support we have seen in the past couple of years?

My fear is that the implementation of universal credit may well have a deeply damaging impact on Britain’s children. In particular, I would like the Minister to give us an update on the Department’s estimates, published in 2011 and updated in 2013, for the impact of universal credit on the number of children living in poverty.

12.46 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I echo the words of the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). The Backbench Business Committee has, properly, allowed this debate and he has introduced it very wisely indeed.

In my mind, there is a difficulty with the motion as it currently stands on the Order Paper: it seeks to look at universal credit in isolation. That is a problem, because what we need to consider is the entire package of measures the Government have introduced with regard to changes to benefits and very significant movements forward in seeking to tackle child poverty. We need to look at all of those measures in the round and as a whole, and not focus solely on universal credit. The package of measures we need to be thinking about are the increases in the personal tax allowance, the introduction of the national living wage and better childcare provision, which goes to the heart of what this debate seeks to address.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman talks about needing to take these issues in the round. Does he accept that in February this year the IFS predicted that, taking all issues in the round including planned tax and benefit reforms, child poverty will increase from 15.1% in 2015-16 to 18.3% by the end of this Parliament?

Peter Heaton-Jones: I am glad the hon. Gentleman mentions the IFS, because it also said that “universal credit should make the system easier to understand, ease transitions into and out of work, and largely get rid of the most extreme disincentives to work or to earn more created by the current system.”

The IFS seems to quite like the introduction of universal credit, which has to be looked at in the round. The Government are introducing a whole package of measures. I listed some of them. The growing economy and rising employment also help.

The other issue that is not taken into account when we consider universal credit is what is sometimes referred to as the dynamic impact—a horrible bit of jargon—of universal credit. This seeks to take into account changes in individual behaviours in response to the introduction of universal credit. It is quite difficult to analyse but it means improved opportunities for people to move from welfare into work, which changes people’s behaviours. This is a vital point. Even though it is in its early stages of introduction, as pointed out already, there is significant evidence that universal credit is doing well and succeeding at ensuring that more people move off welfare and into work. The latest figures show that for every 100 people who found work under the old jobseeker’s allowance system, about 113 universal credit claimants move into a job. What matters, however, is not just the fact of moving into a job but the quality of the job and the pay, and people are actively looking to increase their hours and their earnings as well.

Jeremy Quin: Does my hon. Friend, like me, welcome the emphasis on in-work progression? The story does not end when someone happily gets into a role. It matters also that they are encouraged through Jobcentre Plus to improve their hours and their standing in the firm and get paid more over time.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. That is important, and the latest figures show that 86% of claimants on universal credit are actively looking to increase their hours, which compares to 38% under JSA, which is a significant difference. People are actively looking to increase their earnings as well,
which goes to the heart of his point. Some 77% of those on universal credit are actively looking to increase their earnings, compared to 51% on JSA. That is a really important part of the universal credit package.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Is the hon. Gentleman really trying to tell us that the dynamic impact will compensate for the loss of income that families, particularly those with disabled children, will suffer under the universal credit changes?

Peter Heaton-Jones: The hon. Gentleman leads me on to talk about children in particular—the essence of the issue the motion seeks to address—so let us talk about what the Government are doing to reduce child poverty. The latest households below average income statistics show that child poverty in the UK remains at its lowest level since the mid-1980s—the lowest for 30 years. The number of workless households has fallen by about 750,000 since 2010 and—this is the crucial point that goes to the heart of it—there are nearly 500,000 fewer children living in workless households.

The Government, therefore, have a good and sound record on reducing child poverty and targeting the welfare system very carefully at those who need it the most. That is the key to what universal credit seeks to do. The hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) mentioned young children. The Government have invested £2.5 billion in the troubled families initiative and the same amount again in the pupil premium, which provides extra funding for the most disadvantaged children in school. And here is a measure we do not hear much about from the Labour party: income inequality is down under this Government.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) indicated dissent.

Peter Heaton-Jones: That is what the statistics show. It is important to remember that the Government are having some success.

I want to touch on the Government’s announcement of the introduction of the new and significantly strengthened approach to the life chances of Britain’s most disadvantaged children. I sat last autumn through 17 sittings of the Bill Committee for the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, along with the Minister and other hon. Members I can see today on both sides of the House. For those who were not there, this was a very important part of what the Committee discussed. The Act seeks to ensure that the life chances of the most disadvantaged children are front and centre in all the welfare reforms we seek to introduce. That will be central to our one nation approach over the next five years. Ministers are committed—I have heard them say it several times—to this much more effective measure focused on the real causes of poverty.

I repeat, however, that we need to look at this as a whole. I am not saying that this debate is not worthwhile, but I question the wording of the motion and the fact that it merely isolates universal credit. We need to look in the round at all the measures and welfare reforms that the Government have introduced and which amount to a significant and beneficial package of reforms.

Stephen Timms rose—

Peter Heaton-Jones: If the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I am coming to a conclusion.

I understand the concerns that the right hon. Gentleman has raised and which the motion seeks to address, but having sat through the Bill Committee, I think that universal credit will bring longer-term benefits. It needs to be seen as part of a package of measures. I am not for one minute saying it is not important that we look at how children are being affected by these measures, but I know that the Minister is addressing the matter and that the Government have put the effect on children at the heart of their full package of welfare reforms. We want to ensure that those effects are beneficial. I believe that they will be and that the Government are moving in the right direction.

12.55 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for his eloquent introduction to the debate and the Backbench Business Committee for bringing it to the main Chamber.

This debate is of particular concern in my constituency, where there is a high proportion of people claiming welfare benefits. As of April 2015, there were 14,500 people on tax credits, and it is estimated that, by 2020-21, 19,000 people will be on universal credit. According to figures from Child Poverty Action Group, reductions in work allowance under universal credit, introduced in April 2016, will result in a working single parent in rental accommodation losing up to £554 per year and in a working single parent who owns their home losing up to £2,000 per year. In both cases, this is more than double the loss suffered by working couples. The majority of these single parents are women. Once again, this is a cut that comes at the expense of women, who account for 86% of cuts to benefits and tax savings. This figure has increased, not decreased, as a result of the Chancellor’s latest Budget.

A single parent already working full time on the national living wage will have to work an extra 46 days each year—more than two additional working months—to make up what they have lost. While the Government may paint these reductions in income as an incentive to work, for single parents already in full-time work, extra hours are not realistic. Support for childcare might have increased from 70% to 85%, but this will not compensate families for the losses they will suffer as a result of the changes in universal credit. End Child Poverty estimates that 42% of children in my constituency live in relative poverty, which makes it the constituency with the sixth-highest level of child poverty. The four-year freeze on support for children under universal credit is expected to reduce the value of key children’s benefits by 12% by the end of the decade, when creeping inflation will also have added to the cost of living.

In 2011, the Government forecast that universal credit would lift up to 350,000 children out of poverty. In 2013, this figure was amended to 150,000 and the Government today refuse to give a figure. There remain significant gaps between the Government’s aim of making work pay through the new universal credit regime and the reality of families facing huge cuts to their income. I would like to ask the Minister two questions. First, will the Government review the impact of work allowance
[Kate Osamor]

reductions on working families, particularly working single families? Secondly, will they agree to review annually the decision to freeze most key children’s benefits for four years?

As I have stated, the impact of changing tax credits to universal credits will affect families in my constituency. I am here representing them and trying to get their voices heard in the Chamber, so I ask that the Government take very seriously the effect the changes will have on families and women.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does she agree that we should be particularly concerned about the plight of the self-employed—an increasingly large group of income insecure people? Does she share my concern that about 800,000 self-employed people are likely to lose £1,000 a year as a result of the cuts to universal credit?

Kate Osamor: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. There are many lone workers and people who have their own businesses in my constituency, and they have come to see me in my office to say that they are very concerned because they need to use benefits to top up their salaries. This is an issue that I hope the Government will take into account.

I conclude by asking the Minister to review the impact that work allowance reductions are having on working families, particularly single families. Secondly, will the Government agree to review annually the decision to freeze most key children’s benefits for four years?

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con) rose—

Ms Buck: Does the hon. Gentleman believe that giving a tax cut to the richest people in society and introducing the married person’s tax allowance are a better use of public money than investment in universal credit?

Richard Graham: I have two points in response to that. First, when it comes to generating more tax, I subscribe to the philosophy of the former Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, who said:

“It matters not whether the cat is white or black so long as it catches mice.”

On this occasion, when we lowered the top tax rate from 50% to 45%, the additional tax revenue was £8 billion. My question to the hon. Lady and her colleagues is this, “Would you rather have an extra £8 billion of tax revenue to spend on our vital services, or enjoy the ideological thrill of raising the top tax rate and collecting less tax revenue with less to spend on services?” I know what I would go for; I am not sure about her.

Ms Buck indicated dissent.

Richard Graham: The hon. Lady is shaking her head, which suggests to me that my colleague on the Select Committee on Work and Pensions is still from the school of thought that prefers to raise taxes and get less tax revenue. I would have thought that the period of Reagonomics and Thatcheromics had made it very clear that we incentivise businesses to grow, to generate more revenue and to employ more people by creating a business-friendly environment rather than the opposite. It is something that the hon. Lady and her party will have to work out.

The hon. Lady’s second question was on the married person’s tax allowance. All the evidence from research done over a period of years shows that we have happier families and less dysfunctional behaviour when we have closer families, and marriage plays a key part in that. I recognise that not all Members subscribe to the importance of marriage as a contributing factor to a happy society, but we should probably leave that debate for another day.

My second main point relates to what the right hon. Member for East Ham said about universal credit, in particular the part of the motion that states that “many may struggle with elements of the new approaches to payment and administration”.

"I think I am right in saying that Labour opposed every one of the welfare reforms pushed through by the coalition Government in the last Parliament, which amounted to some £20 billion of reductions in expenditure, and indeed have opposed everything in this Parliament as well. This comes at the same time as consistently opposing in this Parliament measures that the Government have taken to improve conditions for businesses that generate, directly and indirectly, 75% of all the tax that pays for the services, the welfare and the pensions that we all know are so important to our constituents."

Richard Graham: I am very grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Today’s debate comes at an interesting time. The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) introduced it with his usual reasonableness on an issue of concern to everybody here. There are two or three points that I would like to highlight in a brief contribution. The first is the biggest strategic challenge for the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues, which is where the balance of the strategy that Labour Members are trying to pursue will lead the country. I offer two thoughts. The first is that Labour Members have still not told us what reforms to welfare benefits they would make to reduce the budget deficit that we and all our constituents still face. At a time when the country is spending more on the interest of our debt than on the education of our children, it has to be wrong to ignore this part of the equation.

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There is a philosophical issue here, too. Originally, the current Minister for Welfare Reform, Lord Freud, acted as an adviser to the last Labour Government, and he recommended many solutions to the problem of tax credits, which he has now implemented in government with our party. I once asked him what the difference was between the work he had done for the previous Labour Government and our own Government. He said that the difference was simply that we would implement it.

The former Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer and Member for Edinburgh South West, now Lord Darling, said in this House that Labour had not implemented universal credit simply because it was “too difficult”. His party has always struggled with the fact that we are implementing something that it had decided was too difficult. Labour Members have not been able to work out whether to oppose it all in principle, which would be odd, given that they had looked at it, or whether to attack it in detail on the basis that it is too complicated to do. As universal credit continues to move forward on its journey across the country, affecting a growing number of people, I suspect that that challenge is going to be more and more difficult, and those on the Labour Front Bench are going to have to reconcile these problems.

The assumption behind what the right hon. Member for East Ham said today is that universal credit is basically too complicated, with the twist that it now cannot be understood by those who are going on to it. I do not know how many Members have actually been to their Jobcentre Plus and spoken to people working there about the implementation of universal credit, as well as to their customers, namely our constituents who are receiving it. I suspect that those who have done so, as I have, will find that people working in Jobcentre Plus find universal credit to be a huge step forward. More than one officer working there described it to me as a quiet revolution, while those receiving it find it much easier to understand than the plethora of often contradictory benefit systems that our country built up over a long period of time.

I fundamentally disagree with the right hon. Member for East Ham—reluctantly, because I agree with him on several things—on the notion that universal credit cannot be understood by those either receiving it or responsible for administering it. He claimed that there were “long delays” to universal credit claims, and that the Trussell Trust had said once again, having said it several times before, that the increase in demand for food banks was largely down to the delays in benefits. Because I had heard that argument for quite a long time, last year I set up with my local citizens advice bureau a service agreement that obliged it to refer to me any instance of any of my constituents who are waiting longer to receive benefits due to them than the accepted norm set by the DWP. That covered any situation. In the last six months, how many people had been referred to my office for unnecessary delays to their benefits? One—one single constituent. It could be argued that there is not a complete correlation between people referred to the food bank by the CAB and those who go to the food bank. That could be true. A number of organisations in the city of Gloucester, including my own office, refer people to our food bank. None the less, the CAB is probably—I do not have the precise statistics—the biggest single organisation handling the welfare difficulties of my constituents. It is, I think, telling that over the last six months there has been only one case of unnecessary delays in the receipt of benefits.

Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman has got slightly the wrong end of the stick in relation to what I was saying. The problem with universal credit is that the five-week delay is built into the design of the benefit. That is not a fault; it is how it is supposed to work. The assumption is that someone who has last month’s pay cheque in the bank can cope for a month. That is the problem that the Trussell Trust is starting to identify, and Citizens Advice is saying that, in practice, it is proving to be a very serious problem for many claimants of the new benefit.

Richard Graham: I do not think that I have grasped the wrong end of the stick, but I may have grasped a different part of the stick, and I think it is important for all parts of the stick to be considered in this context. I will, however, respond directly to the point that the right hon. Gentleman has made.

I have sought permission from the Department for Work and Pensions and my local Jobcentre Plus to install a DWP adviser in the George Whitefield Centre—appropriately, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, named after the founder of Methodism—where there is both a food bank and a health service for the homeless. I hope that, should I be fortunate enough to receive approval from the Department and the Jobcentre Plus, the adviser, with access to a computer, will be able to see precisely where the problems are, and I hope that if, as the right hon. Gentleman suggests, the inbuilt delay is a five-week delay, that fact will be revealed. I put it to him gently, however, that there are a number of alternative scenarios, one of which is—to put it bluntly—that when people go to a food bank and are asked why they have done so, it is very easy for them to say, “I have had problems getting my benefits.” I hope that one of the advantages of the presence of a DWP adviser will be the ability to establish the extent to which that claim is correct, or possibly slightly exaggerated. The reality of life, I think, is that people get into financial difficulties—through no particular fault of their own—in a series of different ways, and I think that that is an aspect of the Trussell Trust feedback that has not been explored in enough detail so far.

Neil Gray: It is not just the Trussell Trust that is reporting circumstances in which people find themselves requiring emergency food aid from food banks. In February last year, the Poverty Alliance in Scotland reported that delays in benefits and cuts in social security support were the direct responsible contributing factor in those circumstances. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will reflect on the fact that that is being said not just by one organisation, but by many.

Richard Graham: I sort of thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I do not think that he should rely on statements made by particular charities that tend to generalise. I encourage him to look into the position in his own constituency in detail, so that he can establish what the issues are.

At some point, the hon. Gentleman will also have to face the same strategic issue to which I referred the right hon. Member for East Ham and his party. If the position of the hon. Gentleman’s party is that all welfare expenditure is sacrosanct from now until the end of all days, he and his party will have to think about where they will find
the revenue to fund that, and how they will do so without building up excessive debt on which interest has to be paid, which reduces the amount of money that is available to be spent on services.

If the hon. Gentleman studies—as our Select Committee has—the ratio between our country’s budget expenditure on welfare and that of some of the largest comparable nations in Europe, such as France and Germany, he will see that we spend more on welfare than they do. That is the challenge there for him and his party. He shakes his head, but reality will have to intervene one day, as my colleague Ruth Davidson in Scotland has pointed out several times.

Other Members wish to speak. Let me end by addressing one particular aspect of child poverty. There is a philosophical divide between different parties in the House on this issue, but an important part of the motion tabled by the right hon. Member for East Ham is the request for the Government “to ensure that the number of children in poverty...falls as a result of the introduction of the new universal credit system.”

Evidence suggests that the highest poverty exit rate is strongly linked to the children of families who have gone into work, and have moved from part-time to full-time employment. I believe I am right in saying that 75% is the figure that enables the number of children referred to in the motion to be reduced. I think that that tells us that any welfare system which encourages people to work longer hours, obtain promotion and advance themselves in different jobs will have a hugely beneficial impact on the number of children in poverty, and I have no doubt that the steps taken by the Government to improve the chances of those receiving universal credit of moving up the ladder in the workforce will have a positive effect on the number of children in relative poverty.

I have made four points. First, there was the philosophical point about the strategy of welfare relative to tax revenue. Secondly, there was the point about the value of universal credit to our own constituents. Thirdly, there was my gentle challenge to some of the assumptions of the Trussell Trust about why people are going to food banks, and the role of DWP advisers in shedding more light on that issue. Finally, I drew attention to the impact that his Department’s policies are having on children. Now, while he is relatively new to the job, we can call them inherited policies, but as he begins his tenure by marching to the defence of everything that went before him, those policies will become his own, and he will be responsible for what unfolds. He has an opportunity to make his mark on the Department and to embark on a genuine departure from what went before—as was announced when I was appointed—and that needs to start with the cuts in universal credit. As the shadow Secretary of State rightly said yesterday, if he does not make those cuts, how will he be any different from his predecessor? Perhaps the Minister could relay that, and other issues raised in the debate, to the absent Secretary of State.

The cuts that are being deferred from tax credits and lumped on to universal credit will have a very real impact on the quality of children’s lives and their long-term life chances. The cut in the work allowance—slashing the only work incentive in universal credit—will hit families and lone parents the hardest. Lone parents without housing costs will experience the largest reduction in their work allowance, from £8,800 last year to £4,764 this year—a cut of £4,000, according to the House of Commons Library. These are working families. The children of single parents are already twice as likely to risk living in poverty as those in couple families, and, according to the Child Poverty Action Group, cuts in work allowances will only exacerbate that disadvantage.

Last week the Resolution Foundation published a devastating report for the Government, which stated that under universal credit, half a million working families would be significantly worse off, even given the changes in tax allowances and the increase in the minimum wage for over-25s. According to analysis published by the Institute for Fiscal Studies in February this year, absolute child poverty is projected to increase from 15.1% in 2015-16 to 18.3% by the end of this Parliament in 2020.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Families who care for disabled children and are prevented from working for that reason are set to be particularly badly affected by the Government’s changes. Contact a Family estimates that those families will be at least £1,600 a year worse off. Does my hon. Friend agree that this change directly discriminates against such families, and that the Government should go back to the drawing board?

Neil Gray: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and later in my speech I will touch on what is being done in Scotland to address some of those issues.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that the projected increase in child poverty is driven entirely by a sharp rise in poverty among families with three or more children, which is itself the result of planned tax and benefit reforms. Those figures are UK-wide. My constituency already has a shocking child poverty rate of 21.7%. If the rise in child poverty projected by the IFS is universally applied, Airdrie and Shotts will have a quarter, rather than a fifth, of its children living in poverty by the end of this Parliament because of this Government’s tax and social security changes. Surely it is time for the Secretary of State to see these statistics and the children
behind them. One child in every four in my constituency will be in poverty if he accepts the tax and benefit changes that he has inherited.

The Child Poverty Action Group agrees that to lift families out of poverty and disadvantage, the relationship between universal credit and work must be right. It is calling for: the restoration of work allowances, particularly for single parents; a second earner allowance for couples, to support second earners to get into work without facing an immediate withdrawal of universal credit; and investment in high-quality employment support that recognises people's individual circumstances, so that universal credit can meet its aspiration to promote in-work progression through the provision of high-quality advice, rather than through the threat of sanctions. Those proposals certainly provide food for thought.

Universal credit was supposed to involve the streamlining of a complicated system to improve work incentives, tackle poverty and reduce the scope for error and fraud. Instead, we have massive delays, huge overspends on implementation, and fundamental changes and cuts to awards that will drive more children and families into poverty. This is not what was intended, but because of this Government's obsession with austerity at any cost, it is the reality. Universal credit has been watered down and completely undermined, especially by cutting the work allowance to ribbons.

Under the latest Scotland Bill, the newly re-elected Scottish National party government will have power over 15% of our social security spending. [ Interruption. ] I hear some chuntering from across the Chamber. Although 15% will be determined in Scotland, the vast majority of social security issues will still be determined here in Westminster, which is why it is so important that we on these Benches challenge this Government whenever we can. I would prefer it if my colleagues up the road had these Benches challenge this Government whenever we can. I would prefer it if my colleagues up the road had

Neil Gray: Alongside the rape clause, which my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) has raised repeatedly, this is one of the most disgraceful aspects of these provisions. People plan a family based on the circumstances in which they find themselves at the time. Let us take the example of two working parents. What would happen if, further down the line, having had three children, they were unable to work? The two child policy is an absolute disgrace.

Angela Crawley: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. This Government have absolutely no right or reason to dictate to families how many children they ought to have, or to place a monetary value on a child's life or someone's livelihood.

This Government have scrapped the first child premium, worth £545 a year. That is the equivalent of the family element in tax credits, which was designed to help families with the extra cost of their first child. Obviously, this Government do not prioritise the need to give every child the best possible start in life. The Scottish Government and the First Minister have ensured that every new-born child in Scotland will receive a box that will allow the family to deliver the best possible care, health and support for their child. In what initially appears to be a benefit to low-income families, support for childcare has been increased from 70% to 80% of the cost. However, this policy will not compensate for the far greater losses families will see as a result of other changes to the benefits system.

That brings me to my final point, which relates to disabled claimants. Disabled individuals are often the worst off as a result of benefit reforms, and they are certainly the worst-off group as a result of universal credit. They have been wholly ignored in the process. At present, families with a disabled child can claim £60 per week through the disability element of child tax credits. Under universal credit, £29 per week of support will be claimed under disability additions, but according to the Government's own estimates, this means that
100,000 disabled children stand to lose more than half their entitlement. How can the Government look at those figures and honestly justify their actions? Disabled lone parents with young carers stand to lose £58 per week as a result of the loss of the severe disability premium under universal credit. Again, this Government have failed to take those individuals into consideration. Lone parents and those under 25 are likely to lose up to £15 per week as a result of reductions in standard allowances for those groups under universal credit.

The Government must commit to fairer arrangements, especially for those most at risk. While they continue to balance the books on the backs of the poor, many more children will continue to grow up in poverty. While they continue to allow tax avoiders and big business to benefit, those who work hard to put food on the table for their loved ones will continue to lose out. When will this Government learn? The fact is that one child growing up in poverty is one too many.

1.28 pm

**Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP):** We have had an unexpectedly concise, but nevertheless interesting, debate this afternoon. I echo the remarks of others who have paid tribute to the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for securing the debate and giving us this opportunity to highlight the impacts that the universal credit scheme will have on children. Right at the heart of this matter are the recent cuts to the work allowance—implemented just last month—which are set to drive up child poverty quite considerably in the months and years ahead.

Back in January, when the Government performed their U-turn on tax credits, it was clear that the relief would be only temporary for many families. As we have heard today, the transition to universal credit will mean that 3 million working families will no longer be eligible for the support that they would have had under the tax credits system. A further 1.2 million working families will still receive support, but will be worse off. Therefore, according to the Resolution Foundation, 4.2 million families will be on average more than £40 a week worse off, even taking into account increases in the minimum wage and tax allowances.

When universal credit was first introduced, we were told that it would simplify and streamline our benefits system, that it would introduce greater flexibility for those in seasonal jobs or with fluctuating earnings and, crucially, that it would remove the financial disincentives to work created by the previous system. However, that is not what is happening in reality. The introduction of universal credit has simply been an excuse to cut family benefits. As the Resolution Foundation report puts it, the latest cuts to universal credit risk leaving it “little more than a vehicle for rationalising benefit administration and cutting costs to the Exchequer.” That is a truly damning indictment.

The bottom line is that cutting the work allowance under universal credit has destroyed the very aspect that reduced work disincentives—the thing that made it a distinctive policy. The most potentially valuable aspect of universal credit has been butchered, and we are now left with a system that will reduce the incomes of more than 4 million low-income families. People are already working hard to support their families and are struggling to make ends meet. The change is set to send child poverty skyrocketing over the next few years. Far from creating work incentives, the reality is that cuts to the work allowance mean that parents in low-paid jobs face staggering levels of marginal taxation if they take on extra hours. There is no way around the fact that that reduces the incentive to take on extra work. If someone is going to be only 35p in the pound better off per hour, the extra earnings might not even cover their transport costs, much less their childcare.

Working single parents will be particularly badly affected by the changes, because they are being hit with dramatic income cuts. There is also a big disparity between those who live in rented accommodation and those who are owner-occupiers or otherwise not paying housing costs. In rented accommodation, a working couple with children will lose £234 a year, and a working single parent will lose £554 a year. The reductions in income are even starker for those not in rented accommodation. A working couple with children will lose more than £1,000 per year, but working single parents are set to lose a massive £2,628 a year on average.

**Angela Crawley:** A single parent already working full time on the national living wage—otherwise known as a modern increase on the minimum wage—of £7.20 an hour will have to work an additional 46 days a year, equating to two additional months. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is unacceptable?

**Dr Whiteford:** It is not only unacceptable, but completely unrealistic. When the measures were first debated, the Government tried to argue that families affected by the losses could simply work a few extra hours to cover the shortfall. Notwithstanding the availability of extra hours being entirely dependent on the employer’s circumstances—there might not be many extra hours going around in many workplaces at the moment—the Child Poverty Action Group pointed out, as did my hon. Friend just now, that a single parent working full time on the minimum wage would essentially have to work an extra day a week just to make up the shortfall. It is already hard for single parents to manage full-time work and family responsibilities, and I just cannot believe that it is good for them or their children for them to be taking on an extra day a week. Something has to give. People’s health will collapse. People’s children and family life will suffer. It is not the right thing to do.

The effect on families affected by disability will be disproportionate. At Work and Pensions questions yesterday, I mentioned the impact that the introduction of universal credit will have on disabled children. Some time ago, the Children’s Society and Citizens Advice published “Holes in the safety net”, a report which warned that the introduction of universal credit would mean dramatic cuts in support for some disabled children. Some 100,000 disabled children in the UK are likely to be affected and will see their support halved to just £29 a week. As we have heard today, families with a disabled child are twice as likely to be low-income families living in poverty. We know that. We also know that those who live with a significant disability face extra living costs, but it is sometimes too easy to gloss
over the realities of day-to-day life for such children, their parents, and their brothers and sisters. Disability affects the whole family.

Some time ago, I worked for Carers Scotland and will never forget my conversations with parents of disabled children about their experiences, many of which were positive, but nevertheless often enormously challenging, both financially and emotionally. I remember one working mother describing how she had had to give up a full-time professional career and work part time in a lower-paid job, simply because she could not find a nursery willing and able to take on the complex needs of her little boy. I remember another mother talking about realising that she would have to become a full-time stay-at-home parent after her second child was born with quite significant physical disabilities. She and her husband had recently bought a three-bedroom house to accommodate an expanding family, but they had to sell up and downsize, because that was all that they could afford on one income. At the very moment when they needed more space to accommodate growing toddlers and a wheelchair and to enable their elder child to sleep through the night without being woken up by a disabled sibling who needed care during the night, they were instead struggling to make ends meet. Families such as those, for whom £30 a week makes an enormous tangible difference to their quality of life, are being put on the front line.

On the other side of the coin are the cuts under universal credit to the severe disability premium paid to disabled adults, affecting some 25,000 children who live with a severely disabled parent. The level of support will be £58 a week less for such families. Even those in the ESA support group—those who have absolutely no prospect of being fit for work—will be entitled to £28 a week less than under the current system. That will inevitably have an impact on the children in those households, most of whom do not get any extra support at the moment, and it will make life even harder for young people who in some cases are already taking on age-inappropriate levels of domestic responsibility. The Government talk a lot about improving life chances, which we have heard again and again today, but slashing support for disabled children and the children of severely disabled adults who have no prospect of work will only harm those children’s already diminished life chances.

I asked the Government yesterday if their intention really was for low-income families and disabled children to bear the brunt of their cuts agenda. We have heard lots of suggestions today, such as those put forward by CPAG, the Children’s Society, the Resolution Foundation and others, for how the failing universal credit project could be redeemed, not least the need for a credible and up-to-date assessment of the overall impact on child poverty. Instead of trying to defend the indefensible, the Government have an opportunity to go back to the drawing board on universal credit and restore its original policy intent of supporting low-income working families. If they fail to take that opportunity, they will be confirming their reputation as the sort of people who think it is okay to make disabled children and hard-working parents in low-paid jobs pay for the tax breaks being enjoyed by the wealthiest in our society.

1.38 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to hold this debate in the main Chamber. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), whose erudite and considered opening speech was a great contribution to the debate. The hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) talked about the broader context, and I will be only too pleased to do the same in a moment. My hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) spoke powerfully about the plight of lone working parents, who are particularly affected by cuts to the work allowance. I certainly agreed with the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who is no longer in his place, on the idea of ensuring that we visit Jobcentre Plus offices to see universal credit in action, something which I did recently with my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham, but it is equally important to be in contact with local citizens advice bureaux and to visit food banks to see what is happening on the ground.

We heard a useful contribution from the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), who pointed out very well the new approach promised by the new Secretary of State of looking at people, not statistics. I look forward to the Minister telling us how she has changed her approach under her new boss, as I am sure everybody does. We also heard useful contributions from the hon. Members for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford); my hon. Friends the Members for Neath (Christina Rees); the hon. Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin); and for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) and for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty); the hon. Members for Foyle (Mark Durkan) and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier); and my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck).

This debate comes at a key time—a key moment of test for the new Secretary of State—because the outlook is bleak. The Institute for Fiscal Studies expects absolute child poverty to increase from 15.1% in 2015-16 to 18.3% in 2020-21. The Resolution Foundation believes that 200,000 more children, predominantly from working households, will fall into poverty this year. Gingerbread powerfully makes the point that my ho

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that to expect hard-working families to work an extra 200 hours a year just to make up for the cruel cuts in universal credit is an outright insult?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. The hon. Member for North Devon wanted the broader context to be taken into account, so let us take into account the national living wage as well. A single parent who is already working full time on the national living wage of £7.20 an hour will have to work an extra 200 hours a year just to make up for the cruel cuts in universal credit is an outright insult?
The Government were warned about the problems they face today as a result of cuts to universal credit. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission report released just before Christmas, on 17 December, said that the “immediate priority” had to be ensuring that the cuts to the work allowance planned for this April did not go ahead, but the Government simply did not listen. The problem that they are getting to is that their approach is starting to deny the very purposes that universal credit was set up for. The Resolution Foundation states:

“But it is also much changed as a result of the increasingly tight financial restraints placed on it over recent years. These have involved more than just a reduction in the money available under UC, they have also altered the very structure of the policy—changing the composition of winners and losers and fundamentally damaging its ability to deliver against its purported aims.”

Perhaps that explains why the Government are so terrified of publishing an up-to-date impact assessment. Perhaps it explains why they are so terrified of telling us the figures as to what they expect will happen to child poverty over this Parliament.

Christina Rees: Does my hon. Friend agree that we also urgently need an analysis of the gender impact of the Government’s policy since 2010, because the design of universal credit, like that of other Government policies, does seem to have a disproportionate impact on women?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that, and we all know that the brunt of the cuts has fallen on women. That is precisely what the Government should be taking into account and they should carry out such an analysis. It is not as though it would be that difficult for the Government to come up with these figures. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) chairs the all-party group on health in all policies, whose excellent report, produced in February, made it absolutely clear that there is a danger of the progress on tackling child poverty made by the last Labour Government going into reverse as a result of what this Government are doing.

This is not, however, just about the Government’s lack of compassion on these things; it is also about their complete lack of competence. We should not forget how universal credit has been implemented. On 1 November 2011, the former Secretary of State told us in a press release that there would be no fewer than 1 million people claiming universal credit “by April 2014”, but by November 2015 the actual figure was 155,568, which, by my reckoning, is less than a fifth of the target he had set himself in 2011. The day on which the roll-out is to be completed seems to be forever going back. When I was younger, my great aunt and uncle used to own a pub, in which there was a brass plaque just above the bar saying, “Free beer tomorrow”. The problem being that every time people went in it still said, “Free beer tomorrow”. I am afraid that that is where we are getting to with universal credit: six years later, we are still waiting for it to be implemented.

This is not just about the speed of the implementation; it is also about the risks that the Government have identified. Let us also not forget the universal credit risk register, whose disclosure the Government, again, fought tooth and nail against. They were forced to disclose it; they love spending legal fees on defending the indefensible. It identified 65 open risks to the programme, including that of skilled staff resources not being in the right place at the risk time. The list of incompetence does not end there. The former Secretary of State made clear—that was the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham about people being broadly the same on universal credit as on tax credits—the following when answering departmental questions:

“Here is the key: I have already said that those who are on universal credit at the moment will be supported by their advisers through the flexible support fund, to ensure that their status does not change.”—[Official Report, 7 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 707.]

The idea being of course that the discretionary flexible support fund can make up the difference. I have with me the letter that the Department is sending out on this issue. I do not know whether the Minister has seen this, as the rumours are that since she declared for British exit she does not get to see all the documents in her Department—I am happy to show it to her if she has not. It sets out what the new amount of money is, but there is not one mention of the flexible support fund.

When we are talking about incompetence, it is almost as though some Department for Work and Pensions Ministers have been in competition with each other. We will have to give the top award to the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara), although I feel bad in doing so because he is only a part-timer in the Department. However, his answer on mitigating the effect of cuts was as follows:

“Let us not forget, the fact that every time we fill up our tank with petrol there is a saving...because of the freezing of the fuel duty.”—[Official Report, 6 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 342.]

If the answer in 2016 from the Tories to those who lose out is, “Go and fill up your car”, it shows how out of touch they are. I picked him out for the top spot in the incompetence league, but in recent months the Minister for Employment has become used to missing out on the top spot. [Interruption.] I will certainly carry on.

The problem is that naked politics is interfering with universal credit. Do not take my word for it; take the word of the former Secretary of State who, when interviewed on the Andrew Marr show on 20 March, said that

“It looks like we see benefits as a pot of money to cut because they don’t vote for us”.

Let us never forget that, because what it says to children in poverty is that we are only interested in their parents if they voted for us or are likely to vote for us at the next election.

What else did the former Secretary of State say about what was happening to the Government’s social security changes? He said this:

“There has been too much emphasis on money saving exercises and not enough awareness from the Treasury, in particular, that the government’s vision of a new welfare-to-work system could not repeatedly be salami-sliced.”

We heard even worse from him, including his damning criticism of the Treasury:

“I am unable to watch passively while certain policies are enacted in order to meet the fiscal self-imposed restraints that I believe are more and more perceived as distinctly political rather than in the national economic interest.”
Any arguments made today by the hon. Member for Gloucester that these cuts are about a reduction in our deficit were blown apart by what was said by the former Secretary of State. What he was saying is that it is all about the politics and career of the Chancellor.

Mark Durkan: Does the hon. Gentleman also remember that the former Secretary of State made it very clear that the Treasury was imposing the cuts through the welfare cap, which, unfortunately, was supported by both sides of the House in the last Parliament? Now, however, that cap has become the search engine for cut after cut, and, given that even he was expressing criticism of it, does need to be addressed.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes, it does need to be addressed. As ever, the hon. Gentleman makes a distinctly useful contribution to these matters.

There is no greater moral and economic purpose that we could have in this place than eradicating child poverty. In 1999, the Labour Government promised to do that by 2020. To do it and to achieve it is to ensure that every single child has the ability to unlock their potential regardless of their background.

The European Union—dare I say it—has pledged to take at least 20 million out of poverty and social exclusion by 2020. I very much fear that the Minister for Employment wants not only to leave the European Union, but to pursue policies that will plunge more people into poverty by 2020 than would be the case if we were inside the European Union. The levels of child poverty today are a damning indictment of this Government. They bring shame on this country. The Government must act urgently, and I commend this motion to the House.

1.52 pm

The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel): I welcome the debate and congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on both securing it and making an incredibly thoughtful contribution. I want to put my tributes to him on the record, especially as I have spent time with him in Committee. He mentioned the early stages in the development of universal credit and the first Welfare Reform Act 2012. I was also on that Bill Committee and know that he made some notable contributions to the discussions on universal credit and on the changes that the Government were undertaking at the time.

I also want to thank Members from all parts of the House—my hon. Friends the Members for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham), and the hon. Members for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford)—for contributing to this important discussion. I will come on to the points that they made a little later.

Before I move on to the details of universal credit, it is probably worth setting out the Government’s commitment to—yes—universal credit and also to what has been at the heart of universal credit and our welfare reform changes. Universal credit has been revolutionising the welfare system by focusing on making work pay, and I will go into detail on the points that have been made about incentivising work.

For the first time, we are helping people not only into work, but to have personalised support while they are in work. We are seeking to transform individuals’ outcomes when it comes to employment support. We want to ensure that they are supported in work and have sustainable employment outcomes as well. That has been very much at the heart of our welfare reforms. When we discuss universal credit in the broader sense, it is important to recognise that it has been instituted and developed so that it is easier to start work and to earn more, and that is because of the personalised support that it offers. Under the old system, there was little or no support when someone started work.

Universal credit provides for a Jobcentre Plus work coach. As Members have said, work coaches are focused on providing support and in-work progression. Universal credit mirrors the world of work. Like most jobs, universal credit is paid in a single monthly amount. It aims to make work pay. It stays with the claimant after they move into work. On top of that, universal credit is part of a package of reforms that runs alongside the introduction of the national living wage.

There were comments about the delivery of universal credit. What we have seen is that the national roll-out is now complete and that the digital service for all claimants will start to roll out nationally from May. Once completed in June 2018, it will no longer be possible to make newer claims from legacy benefits. We have been very focused on the agile delivery of universal credit. Just yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State re- emphasised the fact that we would rather have an agile delivery of universal credit than a big bang approach, which more often than not jeopardises the delivery of our benefit system.

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focused purely on the symptoms of poverty, rather than on the root causes. We now believe that, through our commitment to ending child poverty and improve life chances, our two measures will ensure that there is real action in the areas that will make the biggest difference to poor children, both now and in the future.

We have also committed to publishing a life chances strategy, and it will set out a comprehensive plan to fight disadvantage and extend opportunity. It will include a wider set of non-statutory measures on the root causes of child poverty, including family breakdown, problem debt and drug and alcohol addiction.

When the strategy is published, I will be working not just with my colleagues on the Conservative Benches, but with all Members of the House, as this is such an important issue. The hon. Member for Edmonton talked about it, and I am alarmed to hear how high her constituency is ranked in terms of child poverty. We will need to develop the right ways to tackle these deep-rooted social problems and work collectively to transform children’s lives so that ultimately they too can reach their full potential. It is important that all Members work constructively towards that aim.

Stephen Timms: What is the Government’s current estimate of the impact on the number of children growing up in poverty of the implementation of universal credit?

Priti Patel: I do not have information or data to hand on the current estimate, but the Government previously published figures on UC and child poverty. As other Members have commented on this, I will be very happy to write to them and to the right hon. Gentleman to update them on those numbers.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Does the Minister think that that figure will be more or less than the 200,000 additional children going into absolute poverty cited by the Resolution Foundation?

Priti Patel: As the hon. Gentleman has just heard me say, when we publish our life chances strategy and focus on tackling the root causes of child poverty—we are committed to eradicating child poverty, as well—we will be driving those numbers down.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that when this life chances strategy is published, all hon. Members will see the strategy is published, all hon. Members will see that completely.

The point about universal credit, of course, is that it removes barriers that prevent people from finding work and increasing their hours and earnings. Universal credit provides the right support to incentivise work and, in particular, removes some of the barriers that were in place, including the restrictions on hours worked, such as the 16-hour rule.

Not just in this debate but in others and in various Committees of this House, we have been very clear that universal credit claimants receive not only support from their work coaches but additional support for childcare costs. Our in-work progression trials have begun to test how work coaches can continue to provide tailored support to in-work claimants so that they can progress and, importantly, increase their earning capacity.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford: I know that the issue of in-work claimants is still at a fairly embryonic stage, but 40% of the DWP’s own staff are likely to be affected by that in-work conditionality approach. I know that various hon. Members have asked the DWP for answers on whether it will offer those staff the extra hours they need to avoid being sanctioned and having their tax credits and universal credit cut. Will the Minister comment on that now?

Priti Patel: We have been very clear that universal credit is there to secure employment opportunities and in-work progression for everyone who is on it. I come back to the wider support universal credit provides for families, which has been touched on. Parents on universal credit can claim back 85% of their childcare costs when they move into work, compared with 70% under legacy benefits. This is a significant change and means that a working family with two children can now receive up to £13,000 a year in childcare support under universal credit.

Interestingly enough, prior to the recent elections in Scotland, I met the Scottish Minister responsible for childcare to consider the development and uptake of the childcare policy in Scotland, which mirrors many of the programmes that we have in England. Affordable childcare is crucial for working families and I look forward to working with the new Government in Scotland to ensure that we can provide all possible relevant support.

Support for disabled children was also mentioned. We should all be clear—I recall debating these points in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill Committee—that there is clear recognition of the extra costs associated with disabilities. Universal credit will provide support for families with disabled children. Of course, the point about the disabled child addition is that it provides extra support for low-income families with a disabled child. We know that caring responsibilities are enormous for parents with disabled children, and we also know that those parents are less able to take up work. They therefore need greater support, and that is obviously what we are focused on.

Mark Durkan: The Minister refers again to additions and not giving extra support to children with disabilities. Of course, it is not extra or additional to what they would receive now; it is actually a reduction. Will she properly address the terms of the motion and not the fantasy world that she is trying to serve up?
Priti Patel: Let me be clear about this: the Government have been absolutely clear about protecting and supporting the vulnerable and about the support we provide for families with disabled children.

I also want to address some of the points raised about the Resolution Foundation report. It fails to take into account that the highest barriers to entering work for second earners in the current system are virtually eliminated under universal credit through, for example, increased childcare, the fact that there are no restrictions on the number of hours worked and the fact that there are work allowances for those households with children. The report also calls for a more radical focus on boosting claimants’ earnings and, of course, that is exactly what universal credit does. For the first time ever, people are getting personalised support so that they can progress in work and earn more. Universal credit ensures that people are better off for every extra hour they work. Our research shows that 86% of people on universal credit were actively looking to increase their hours, compared with just 38% of people on jobseeker’s allowance, and 77% of people on universal credit were actively looking to increase their earnings, compared with just 51% of people on JSA. That focuses on the type of support that universal credit gives through the personalised work coaches and the additional support that that provides.

I hope that I have made clear the case for universal credit. It is supporting people in work and transforming people’s lives. We already have evidence of that from the indications that I have given. I want to reiterate and emphasise that when it comes to dealing with challenging issues such as child poverty, the Government will be publishing our life chances strategy shortly. I look forward to working with all right hon. and hon. Members to tackle these fundamental issues, which are being supported by the implementation of universal credit.

I am grateful to everybody who has pressed the Minister for an update on the impact of universal credit on the number of children growing up in poverty, including the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), colleagues on the Labour Benches and my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) on the Front Bench. I am disappointed that the Minister was not able to give us a figure, but I am grateful to her for committing to write to us to set out the Government’s current estimate.

My worry is that universal credit has been so watered down and cut that it will no longer get anywhere near the objectives that the Government set for it. We will return to the subject, but the specific estimate that the Minister has committed to providing will be a helpful piece of information for us to continue to assess the impact of universal credit on children.

Question put.

There being no voices for either the Ayes or the Noes, Mr Deputy Speaker declared the Question negatived.

PETITION

Withdrawal of the Housing and Planning Bill

2.10 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I have the pleasure of presenting the petition of 360 UK residents, overwhelmingly from the Carshalton and Wallington constituency, calling for the withdrawal of the Housing and Planning Bill. I thank Councillors Manuel Abellan, Jean Crosby, Jayne McCoy and Joyce Melican, and the leader of Sutton council, Councillor Ruth Domby, for helping to promote this petition, and all my constituents who signed it.

The Housing and Planning Bill not only fails to address the critical shortage of housing, but, worse than that, could lead to a drop in the number of affordable homes. The Bill will do nothing for millions who want to get on the housing ladder, and for those who cannot do so it will damage the prospects of finding an affordable, decent home for rent.

The petition states:
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to withdraw their proposed plans for housing set out in the Housing and Planning Bill.

Following is the full text of the petition:

The petition of the residents of the UK, Declares that there are severe flaws in the Housing and Planning Bill; further that these flaws unfairly discriminate against people within certain sectors of the housing market; and further that they could lead to a drop in the availability of social housing.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to withdraw their proposed plans for housing set out in the Housing and Planning Bill.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[PRO1693]
HMRC Office Closure (Walsall)

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

2.12 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I should tell the House that I do not intend taking the full time available, so Members will be spared that.

I thank the Financial Secretary for coming to the House to respond to the debate. I was alarmed and disappointed that I had to apply for this debate and was granted it so soon after the debate on HMRC closures on 29 April in this Chamber. The Minister will know there has been a worrying unilateral change on the part of HMRC, which has decided to close the Walsall office on 20 June 2016. That has been brought forward, much to the shock of people who work there.

This debate is about public servants and those who have worked in the public interest, and how we treat them. If we want society to thrive, we need a balance between the public sector and the private sector. The public sector provides the framework of a good society, doing the things that it is harder for the private sector to do and that the private sector says it wants Government to do. The debate last week showed how important it was for tax to be collected. All that revenue should go into public services, the NHS, education, skills and infrastructure, among other things.

In the previous debate I referred to the tax gap—the difference between the tax owed and the tax collected. The Minister referred to it too in his summing up. In a survey undertaken in 2014, Richard Murphy said that the tax gap stood at almost £119 billion from tax evasion. That figure has not been challenged, and that is the scale of the amount of tax that needs to come back into the public purse. We need to collect that in order to pay for everything the Government have invested in public services.

Today I hope to persuade the Minister of the case for retaining the office and dealing urgently with the issues of HMRC staff in Walsall. What happened to the Walsall office at Pattinson House offends British values and natural justice. Under “Building our Future” it was announced in November 2015 that the office was to close by March 2017. Then on 4 May HMRC decided that all personal tax staff were to be compulsorily moved to Birmingham some six weeks later, on 20 June 2016. A collective grievance had been brought against the office, and many staff fear that this announcement may be a reprisal for the collective grievance and a petition. I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) in the Chamber. He and I were in the town centre that day and we saw how the public responded to the petition: some 500 signatures were collected in about an hour and a half, supporting the retention of the office. I do not believe I have had a response to the petition from the Department or from the Select Committee.

The grounds for the collective grievance were that HMRC failed to follow Cabinet Office redundancy protocols, including moving the administrative assistants into redundancy procedures unnecessarily; HMRC denied trade union representation in one-to-one discussions with staff about whether they could practically travel to Birmingham; HMRC failed to carry out an equality impact assessment for the closure; HMRC refused to offer staff the opportunity to move to sites other than Birmingham, despite alternative sites being more accessible for some staff; HMRC ignored evidence of increased journey times for Walsall staff, in favour of an unproven use of a variant of Google maps to estimate journey times; and HMRC refused to subject the closure plans to parliamentary scrutiny or to accept accountability for them. HMRC eventually responded to the grievance, but only to claim that it failed to meet the Department’s test of a legitimate grievance. HMRC refused to investigate the grievance under the Department’s procedures.

It cannot be right that the guidelines have not been followed and that the closure has been brought forward to June. The Minister has said in written answers and to the House that HMRC had given a commitment to staff that they would have a one-to-one meeting with their manager to discuss their options at least one year ahead of their office closure. That clearly has not happened in the case of Walsall. He also said that changing locations was not cutting staff, but the staff in Walsall have been given no choice and some are being made redundant. The Minister has also said that it is an operational matter, but who is the executive of HMRC accountable to? When the Minister said that the Government had asked HMRC to reduce costs, that is a policy matter, not an operational matter. The Minister said that the change would make it quicker and easier for taxpayers to report and pay their taxes online. Does that include those who have offshore accounts?

There are still appeals outstanding. Those who are out of scope for a move do not know what will happen to them. There are still concerns about travel support. The Public and Commercial Services Union has not been consulted. It was just told that a resource planning project had been announced. Now staff have been given six weeks to reorganise their lives and their caring responsibilities, when they were expecting that period to be almost a year.

I want to touch on the impact on Walsall. Walsall South has consistently higher levels of unemployment claimants than the rest of the region and the UK—4.4% of constituents claimed unemployment benefits, compared with a UK-wide figure of 2.5%. An assessment by Coventry City Council suggested that with the loss of quality jobs, almost £1.5 billion would be taken out of the local economy—a figure that I have cited before. Walsall South cannot afford to lose such a sum.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): I am pleased that my hon. Friend is putting the case so well. Does she agree that if HMRC’s decision goes ahead, it will have a negative effect on the borough as a whole? It is undesirable. A public body such as HMRC should not act in an arbitrary manner, as my hon. Friend has explained. Would it not be useful for the Minister, when he replies, to try to persuade HMRC to change its decision?

Valerie Vaz: I agree. The Government seem to do some things well—impose contracts on junior doctors, summarily change employees’ contracts, and dismiss them with no consultation and no negotiation.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): You would think that the Government would be a model for industrial relations, bearing in mind the fact that we
pass the legislation in this place; instead, they are becoming the worst employer. More importantly, has my hon. Friend had cases where the public have faced long delays? I had cases like that over Christmas, and I have raised them here many times. At the end of the day, this is about the impact on the public as well as the staff.

Valerie Vaz: I absolutely agree. When unions and the Government are working together, and when unions and employers are working together, there can be a situation where something like the steel industry does not just collapse and we can move forward. We cannot move forward on anything unless we have negotiation and consultation, and that was clearly lacking in this case.

The sad thing about this case is that the majority of the employees are women. The vast majority have worked in the Walsall office for 15 years, and some have worked there for over 30 years. Their average age is 50—yet again, we have women of a certain age being discriminated against, and those with long service and knowledge being ignored. This will have a huge impact on their lives.

Where are the consultation, discussion and negotiation that are the bedrock of a civilised society? Will the Minister look at why some redeployment appeals are still outstanding? It is not clear how many people fall within the requirements regarding reasonable daily travel to Birmingham. What is the position of those who are out of scope? Could staff be offered redeployment in a nearer office, such as Wolverhampton? Could the three administrative assistants be offered promotion? Could long-serving staff be offered enhanced early retirement?

It is in everyone's interests to have a modern, fit-for-purpose office and up-to-date facilities—the Minister, I and everyone else agree on that. However, I would ask him not to close the office. Given the length of experience there, new work can be taken on. That would save money on rent and relocation.

The staff at Pattison House have given all these years to their country, and there is an accountability issue in terms of HMRC as a non-ministerial Government body. If HMRC is accountable to Parliament, the Minister should be able to look at the reasonable suggestions I have made. He may say that this is an operational matter, but that means that he is powerless in the face of an important department, and HMRC is not then accountable to Parliament. That would make a mockery of the Prime Minister's anti-corruption summit, which will be held on Thursday, because HMRC should be focusing its efforts on closing the tax gap, not closing offices. There will be no one in HMRC offices with local knowledge who can assist the public to pay their taxes without the help of accountancy or legal trickery.

I hope the Minister will respond positively for the sake of the staff and their families. We owe that to them for their years of public service.

2.22 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): May I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) on securing the debate? I welcome the opportunity to discuss HMRC’s proposals and, I hope, to address some of the points she raised.

Before doing so, it is worth recapping briefly on what we are trying to achieve with HMRC. The organisation provides an essential service to people in the United Kingdom, not only helping hard-working families with the benefits they need, but making sure that the taxes that fund our vital public services get paid. We want to help HMRC do that better. We want it to be faster and more efficient. We want it to cost less but to deliver more for taxpayers and tax credit recipients. We want it to focus on our top priority: tackling tax evasion and avoidance.

We have already done a lot to move in that direction. Since 2010, we have driven down the tax gap—the difference between what HMRC should theoretically bring in and what it actually collects—to just over 6%, which is one of the lowest rates in the world. That progress is important; without it, we would not have collected £14.5 billion in extra tax. The hon. Lady quoted Richard Murphy’s £119 billion estimate of the tax gap. She said that, as far as she is aware, that figure has not been challenged, but it has been challenged repeatedly, and it is not a number we accept by any means. None the less, it is important that we reduce the tax gap.

We have also committed to investing £1.3 billion in HMRC to make sure it can offer the digital services people expect in the 21st century, and we have committed millions more to improve customer services.

By the end of this Parliament, therefore, customers will start to see real improvements, whether that is reduced call waiting times, finding it quicker and easier to pay taxes online, or being able to use HMRC’s special phone line for businesses. Furthermore, by 2020, we expect HMRC to be saving £700 million a year, as well as delivering an additional £1 billion in revenue in 2020-21.

However, we want to go further. We want to save £100 million a year by 2025, by transforming the estate the HMRC works through and by creating a smaller but more highly skilled organisation. When HMRC was formed in 2005, it had 570 offices spread all over the country. That could hardly be termed efficient, and even now, in 2016, HMRC has around 170 offices, ranging in size from 5,700 people to fewer than 10. In the case of the Walsall office, at Pattison House, for example, there are 56 employees.

Back in November, therefore, HMRC announced its intention to finish the job of making itself more efficient. Over the next 10 years, the department will bring its employees together in large, modern offices in 13 main locations serving every region and nation in the UK. Those offices will be equipped with the digital infrastructure and training facilities they need to work effectively. Not only will these new offices encourage people to work more closely together, but they will provide more opportunities for them to develop their careers.

HMRC is fully aware that its most valuable asset is its people, and I commend the hon. Lady for her interest in the arrangements we are making for the around 56 employees of HMRC in Walsall for when the office is closed. I would like to reassure hon. Members that we are committed to making sure that the people in Walsall—indeed in every HMRC office—are supported through the changes and informed every step of the way.

First, I should remind the House that this is about changing the locations, not cutting staff. Although the Walsall office, in Pattison House, will be closed in 2016-17, HMRC hopes that everyone who is able to will
transfer to an office in central Birmingham and then to a regional centre in Birmingham that will be home to over 3,000 staff.

In February, HMRC made sure that everyone in Walsall had the chance to discuss, on a one-to-one basis, how this will affect them. In particular, that meant checking whether they will be within a reasonable daily commute of the new office and finding out what support they may need to make the move. That could, for example, include an extra contribution towards travel. It is worth pointing out that someone who lives within a reasonable daily commute of another office could get support for up to three years with any additional transport costs. Those outside the reasonable daily travel requirements could receive support with their fares for up to five years. There is therefore support for individuals, which can be considered on a one-to-one basis. However, we remain confident that most people will be able to travel to the new office in central Birmingham.

HMRC will also be asking its Walsall staff to change their area of expertise. As the hon. Lady will be aware, many of them currently specialise in personal tax. As part of HMRC’s restructure, it will be asking them to put their skills to good use in new roles in debt management. To help them make that change, HMRC will be running a full programme of induction and learning.

To address the hon. Lady’s point about why the process has been accelerated, jobs are now available in Birmingham in debt management. The desire is for those jobs to be filled as quickly as possible, and HMRC believes that the staff in Walsall are well placed to perform these roles. That is the reason this has been offered.

Valerie Vaz: First, if the Minister disputes the figure of £11.9 billion of tax avoidance, will he drop me a letter to say how he calculates that so that I can put it to the source? Secondly, this has not been communicated to the staff in Walsall, who were not told that they have been given other jobs; all they were told was that the office would close. The Minister has not dealt with why the process was accelerated.

Mr Gauke: These debt management roles are available in Birmingham, and it makes sense for people currently working in Walsall who are capable of moving to Birmingham to fill them at the earliest opportunity. That is why this has been done. As I say, it was announced in November that Walsall was going to close in the course of the year 2016-17. As these roles in debt management are available, it makes sense to move quickly to fill them.

I am happy to write to the hon. Lady about the tax gap. HMRC publishes its own estimate of the tax gap that is based on considerable work and makes use of highly skilled statisticians. The National Audit Office has described it as “credible”, if I remember correctly. Mr Murphy’s estimates are well known to be controversial—let us put it that way—so this will not come as a surprise to him. He is very well aware that HMRC’s estimate of the tax gap is very different from his. I will set out in my letter some of the reasons why HMRC believes that Mr Murphy’s estimate is not credible. I have debated this issue on a number of occasions, so it would be more than a pleasure to set it out once again.

Mr Winnick: As my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) emphasised, the staff feel strongly that the closure has been dealt with in an arbitrary manner. They are clearly not satisfied, despite what the Minister is saying about full consultation. As I said earlier, this is having a negative effect on the borough as a whole.

Mr Gauke: I note the hon. Gentleman’s points. This was announced in November last year. PCS was present for the announcement and has been engaged throughout this period. I do not accept that HMRC has acted in an arbitrary way. There has been consultation and a series of one-to-one meetings.

Let me pick up on a point raised by the hon. Member for Walsall South about the administrative assistants in cases where there are no suitable roles within debt management. A personal tax team within HMRC is working with those individuals to see whether they are suitable for promotion to a higher grade and, if so, whether they could be offered posts within debt management.

It is necessary, in the view of HMRC—a view that the Government support—to move towards fewer offices where there is an ability to concentrate staff and to have greater flexibility as to the work that they undertake. It will also ensure that there is greater availability of career opportunities within the regional centres. That is the direction that HMRC is going in—we support that—and it does require staff to be moved from some of the smaller offices to the regional centres, in this case to Birmingham.

Valerie Vaz: This is the first time I have heard the term “debt management” in this regard. As a previously practising lawyer, I know what that means. In effect, these staff have been deskilled. They are going from personal taxation into debt management, which is just chasing debts.

Mr Gauke: No, I do not accept the description of debt management as a deskilled role. Debt management often involves making judgments on whether, for example, a business should enter into a time-to-pay arrangement, which is a highly skilled and sensitive role. HMRC’s assessment is that the teams in Walsall are well placed to be retrained to perform this role within debt management. Debt management is not an unskilled role within HMRC.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Would the staff transferred to Birmingham be on the same pay grades, or would there be differences? What would happen to somebody who was put into a lower grade and did not want to go into it?

Mr Gauke: As far as I am aware, there is no suggestion that people will be put into a lower grade as a consequence of these changes. In a couple of cases, HMRC is looking at whether the move will involve a promotion for those members of staff, but there is no suggestion that anyone would have a reduction in pay. As I outlined earlier, this has to be worked out on a one-to-one basis. Staff may
find that they are getting a contribution for up to three years for their additional travel costs as a consequence of a move.

Valerie Vaz rose—

Mr Gauke: I will give way to the hon. Lady one last time.

Valerie Vaz: How many jobs have become available in Birmingham?

Mr Gauke: I think a significant number of jobs are available. The question is how many of the Walsall staff are in a position to move to Birmingham. There is no suggestion of those who are capable of moving to Birmingham entering into redundancy. Jobs are available for Walsall staff. As I say, the jobs in debt management should not be demeaned, criticised, or suggested to be of a particularly low-skilled nature.

We are determined to keep moving forward in helping HMRC do its crucial job more and more effectively. That is why we are supporting these changes, which put the interests of taxpayers at the heart of what HMRC does. HMRC is working closely with all the staff who will play their part in this important reform, and it is determined to continue to do so throughout the process. I hope that hon. Members will join me in commending the work that HMRC does. Although I may not have persuaded the hon. Member for Walsall South, I wish to reassure her that HMRC will continue to work with staff based in Walsall. These changes will help to move HMRC forward to become a more effective, efficient and successful organisation.

Question put and agreed to.

2.38 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 11 May 2016

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Mr Speaker: I have to tell the House that yesterday, together with other right hon. and hon. Members, I attended upon Her Majesty the Queen to deliver the House’s message of congratulations on her 90th birthday. Her Majesty made the following reply:

“Members of the House of Commons,
I am most grateful to you for your address on the occasion of my ninetieth birthday.
I have been deeply touched by the many messages of congratulations which I have received on this particular birthday and I warmly reciprocate the good wishes of Members of the House of Commons at this time.”

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

EU Membership

1. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU. [904912]

2. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU. [904914]

3. Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU. [904915]

6. Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU. [904918]

7. Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU. [904919]

8. Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU. [904920]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I congratulate Nicola Sturgeon and the Scottish National party on achieving the largest number of seats in last week’s Scottish Parliament elections. I look forward to working with her and the new Scottish Government for the benefit of the people of Scotland.

The Government’s position is that Scotland and the United Kingdom will be stronger, safer and better off remaining in a reformed EU. Membership of the EU reduces costs for Scottish businesses; supports jobs in Scotland; and provides an export market currently worth £11.6 billion.

Patricia Gibson: A re-run of “Project Fear” from the Prime Minister will not win the European referendum. Stories of war, genocide and economic crashes are not in keeping with making a positive case for the EU. When will we will hear the positive case for remaining in the EU?

David Mundell: I would like to add my congratulations to the hon. Lady’s husband on his re-election to the Scottish Parliament, where I am sure his witty repartee will once again be welcomed.

The hon. Lady and her colleagues repeatedly call for a positive campaign for Scotland to remain in the EU, but all we hear about from them is process and calls for a second referendum on independence. I call on them to disregard that approach and actually start setting out the positive case themselves.

Gavin Newlands: The UK Government have shown disregard for Scotland’s higher education sector, severely damaging the talent pool by scrapping the post-study work visa against the unanimous wishes of business, civic society and, uniquely, all Scottish political parties. Does the Secretary of State accept the crippling effect that the Government’s EU referendum is having on the ability to attract young talent to Scotland?

David Mundell: The biggest issue facing Scotland currently is the uncertainty over the Scottish Government’s inability to rule out a second independence referendum, which they could quite easily do. I look forward to the First Minister, if she is re-elected to that post, setting out clearly that we will not have a second independence referendum. The Scottish Affairs Select Committee has produced a good report on the work study visa, and the Government are looking at it.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: Does the Secretary of State consider that with 60% of UK landings in Scotland, a Scottish fisheries Minister should lead during the period of the UK presidency of the EU? Would not such an initiative be widely welcomed by Scottish fishermen, or is the Secretary of State still stuck in this Westminster rut of some nations being “more equal” than others?

David Mundell: My position is that Scotland voted decisively to remain part of the United Kingdom, and that the United Kingdom represents Scotland’s interest on fishing in the EU. The hon. Lady may be aware that the Scottish Government and the UK Government have been in discussions on intergovernmental relations, and particularly on how these issues of representation should work in the EU. My understanding is that the previous SNP-led Scottish Government were in agreement with those proposals.
Marion Fellows: This week’s EY report was critical of the UK Government's approach to the energy sector, stating that it is not only stalling project development and investment but jeopardising UK energy security. Does the Secretary of State agree that the best way for Scotland’s energy policy to develop is within the EU?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree that it is in the best interests of Scotland to remain in the EU, and it is also in the best interests of Scotland to remain in the UK, because it has been clearly set out that what is best for the future of Scotland’s energy sector is a UK-wide common market.

Mike Weir: While we obviously want the UK to remain part of the EU, I am seriously beginning to wonder whether the Secretary of State’s mission is to antagonise as many Scots as possible before the referendum. Will he at least agree that should Scotland be dragged out of the EU against its will, that would be a major constitutional change?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that tomorrow night I shall share a platform with the former deputy leader of the SNP, Jim Sillars. I shall make the positive case for Scotland’s remaining in the EU, and I understand that he will make the case for Scotland’s leaving the EU.

Dr Cameron: Professor Simon Wessely, president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, has warned that the UK’s withdrawal from the European convention on human rights would remove safeguards that have been “bolstering the rights of psychiatric service users for decades”. Will the Secretary of State join me in safeguarding mental health services, and oppose any attempts to withdraw Scotland from the convention?

David Mundell: As the hon. Lady knows, the Government is to launch a consultation on the introduction of a Bill of Rights after the EU referendum. However, I agree with her that the UK’s remaining in the EU benefits everyone in Scotland.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the Government are split on the issue of whether we should remain in the European Union. Just like the SNP, with Jim Sillars speaking for the leave campaign? Does he not think that it is somewhat embarrassing for the Government to be associated with that lot?

David Mundell: What the Government do, and what the Scottish National party does not always do, is respect the fact that people have different opinions. My view is very firmly that Scotland should remain in the EU, but I recognise and respect the fact that there are people in Scotland, including SNP voters and supporters, who want Scotland to leave the EU. That is why we are having a referendum, and that is why we are having a debate, and the people will have their say.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Why has my right hon. Friend not emphasised that when we leave the European Union, the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Government and the Scottish people will have sole control over Scottish fishing waters?

David Mundell: I do not believe that the best interests of Scottish fishermen, Scottish farmers or the general population of Scotland would be served by our leaving the EU. My hon. Friend—who now serves on the Scottish Affairs Committee—will know that, for example, large amounts of fish, particularly shellfish caught off the west coast of Scotland, go to a European market.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Scotland, like the rest of the United Kingdom, would be safer if it left the European Union because, as Sir Richard Dearlove, the former head of MI6, has said, “Britain is Europe’s leader in intelligence and security matters and gives much more than it gets in return”?

David Mundell: No.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What assessment has the Secretary of State undertaken of why the SNP is so keen on the EU when it is clear that the EU is in the global economic slow lane, when the EU’s unemployment rates are so much higher—including youth unemployment of more than 50% in certain countries—and when it is an indisputable fact that the common fisheries policy has, over the years, decimated the Scottish fishing fleet?

David Mundell: I note the inherent contradiction in SNP Members’ position, because every argument its members use for Scotland remaining in the EU is an argument that was dismissed when it related to Scotland remaining in the United Kingdom. However, on this occasion I will forgive them because, like them, I believe that it is in Scotland’s best interests to remain in the EU.

Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): Mrs Freer, a pensioner in my right hon. Friend’s constituency, would like to say how pleased she now is to have two Mundells to choose from. She is also seeking reassurance that, as a pensioner, she would be better off in a reformed EU.

David Mundell: I am absolutely clear that the reforms that the Prime Minister brought forward will improve the EU for pensioners and citizens right across Scotland. I also believe that this is not the end of the reform process. The EU is not perfect, even after these reforms, but it is up to the UK to lead in reforming the EU, not to withdraw from it.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware that the EU is based on its current member states. What assessment has he made of last week’s Scottish Parliament election results in regard to ensuring the integrity of one of its largest members and removing the prospect of Scotland having to apply to join as a new member?

David Mundell: There was one clear message from last week’s Scottish Parliament elections: the people of Scotland do not want another referendum. I hope that the First Minister has heard that message loud and clear. The EU referendum is about the UK’s membership of the EU. It is not a rerun of the Scottish independence referendum.
Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): May I also take this opportunity to congratulate all the MSPs who were elected last week, and to congratulate the SNP on its historic third term in government in Scotland? However, on a bad night for my party, my own seat of Edinburgh Southern saw a net gain from the SNP. I also want to congratulate the Secretary of State on his son Oliver being elected to the Scottish Parliament. His family now has two elected members, and they both have fetching beards—the word “fetching” being used loosely in this context.

The evidence is clear that the UK and Scotland are stronger in the EU. In the Scottish context, for example, as the Secretary of State has already said, the benefits include a market for 42% of our exports, a quarter of a million jobs, 10% of our higher education spending and a whole host of social protections. Can he assure the Scottish people that all Conservative MSPs will campaign to stay in the European Union?

David Mundell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his congratulations to my son. I have to say that the high point of the election for me was when someone on the doorstep said, “You look a lot like your dad.” That aside, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that there will be a robust and proper debate in Scotland. Ahead of this referendum process, Ruth Davidson made her position very clear on supporting Scotland remaining in the EU. However, we cannot hide the fact that there are people in Scotland who would like to leave the EU, and I think their views should be reflected. The Conservative party in Scotland is not frightened to hide the fact that there are different views. Indeed, there are different views across Scotland.

Ian Murray: The Secretary of State has not told us what Oliver’s response was when the constituent told him he looked awfully like his dad. Perhaps he could tell us when he comes back to the Dispatch Box. Everyone knows that this EU referendum is more about settling old scores in the Conservative party than about doing what is best for the UK, and indeed Scotland. We also know that the Scottish National party is desperate for any excuse to trigger another independence referendum. However, the truth is that the UK is better off in the EU, and that Scotland is better off in the UK. So is it not the case that this Secretary of State and his Government have taken a huge gamble with the UK’s future, and with Scotland’s future too?

David Mundell: Absolutely not. What we have done is to allow the people of Scotland and the people across the United Kingdom to have their say on this important issue, and they will do so. We need to have a debate in Scotland, and I am campaigning vigorously—as the hon. Gentleman appears to be—for Scotland to remain in the EU. The SNP parliamentary party here at Westminster is campaigning for that as well. People like Jim Sillars are campaigning for Scotland to leave the EU. Let us have a vigorous debate in Scotland over the next few weeks. I look forward to sharing a platform with the hon. Gentleman and with SNP colleagues.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): May I also congratulate Oliver Mundell on his election to the Scottish Parliament? Will the Secretary of State confirm that he will continue to champion the Scotland Act 2016, which he steered through the House and which has given so many powers to the Scottish Parliament to ensure that the Scottish people continue to benefit from being not only in the UK, but in the EU?

David Mundell: I thank my hon. Friend. I must get my son elected more often, because there have been more plaudits today than I recall at previous Scottish questions.

We will of course move forward with the implementation of the Scotland Act, but we will also work hard to achieve a positive outcome for Scotland in the EU referendum on 23 June.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Does the Secretary of State agree that the already high support in Scotland for remaining in the European Union could be improved further still if Scottish farmers could be confident that they will get their CAP payments when they are supposed to?

David Mundell: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point. The reason CAP payments have not been made to Scottish farmers is entirely due to the previous SNP Scottish Government. Any attempt to suggest that it is down to the EU is incorrect. Farmers and others know the benefits to Scotland of being in the EU and will vote to remain.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Were the UK to withdraw from the EU, what impact would that have on Scotland and the EU’s relationship with Malawi, to which I know my right hon. Friend has recently been?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend knows that I recently visited Malawi, and, without being indiscreet, I can firmly say that the Malawian Government are in favour of Scotland and the UK remaining in the EU.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): In the run-up to the European Union referendum, we are delighted on these Benches that the Scottish electorate has returned a pro-European SNP Government with the highest vote of any current party in any national election anywhere in western Europe. Most people in Scotland are pleased that, when given the opportunity, the Scottish electorate did not return a single MSP from the Europhobic UK irrelevance party and that there is a majority in the Scottish Parliament for Scottish independence as a member of the European Union. On the powerful case for remaining
in the EU, will the UK Government please concentrate on making a positive, inspiring case to stay, rather than on rewarmed endless scare stories?

David Mundell: I have made it clear to the right hon. Gentleman that that is my exact intention. Perhaps he could undertake today to stop obsessing about process and a second Scottish independence referendum and to concentrate entirely on the positive reasons for Scotland to remain in the EU.

Angus Robertson: Scotch whisky is the largest net goods exporter to the European Union, both from Scotland and from the United Kingdom as a whole. Does the Secretary of State agree that the European single market is profoundly important and positive for that £1 billion trade, meaning that there is no need for customs forms, duplication of labelling, and safety requirements? Will he stress the positive advantages to the whisky industry, and all exporters from Scotland, to jobs and to profitability of remaining within the European single market and the European Union?

David Mundell: I am absolutely clear that what the right hon. Gentleman states is the case, and I am sure he will have welcomed the visit to Scotland made yesterday by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to stress the importance to the whisky industry of remaining in the single market. The particular points he makes about duplication in relation to labelling, certification and licensing are ones the Scotch Whisky Association has made, and I am sure the public will take them into account when they vote in the referendum.

North Sea Oil and Gas

4. Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support the North sea oil and gas sector.

11. Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support the North Sea oil and gas sector.

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): Of course this is an important sector and it faces difficult times. That is why I am delighted that the Chancellor announced a £1 billion package of measures in the Budget: a reduction in headline rates of tax; major investment opportunities and encouragement in relation to exploration, infrastructure and late-life assets; a quarter of a billion-pound Aberdeen city deal; and the creation of an inter-ministerial group specifically targeting the oil and gas sector.

Glyn Davies: Does the Minister agree that we need a long-term approach to secure the future of the jobs in the oil and gas sector in the North sea, and that part of that future is about making sure the skills that have been developed over many decades are not lost at a time when world prices are very low?

Anna Soubry: I could not agree with my hon. Friend more, which is why we have established an inter-ministerial group specifically looking at this and many other issues, and in a short period of time we will publish our workforce plan.

Graham Evans: The North sea oil and gas industry provides vital home-grown feedstocks to Britain’s chemical industry—Britain’s largest manufacturing sector. Will the Minister assure the House that the Government will continue to take steps to support the many jobs that depend on this vital sector?

Anna Soubry: The short answer is, of course, yes. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he does on the all-party group on the chemical industry. This is a very important sector. I meet people from it on a regular basis and I am very pleased to see the sort of work they are doing to increase exports.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Last week, I raised concerns about the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and the threat to our public services, only for them to be dismissed by the Prime Minister as “the reddest of red herrings.”—[Official Report, 4 May 2016; Vol. 609, c. 170.]

Since then, several high-profile organisations, including Unite, have rejected his claims. Will the Secretary of State make representations to the Prime Minister to insist on specific exemptions to protect Scotland’s NHS and public services?

Anna Soubry: At this Dispatch Box, I and other Ministers repeatedly have said that these sorts of claims—[Interruption.] I am waiting for the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) to take his seat. I do not wish to be rude to the hon. Lady, but I must say that this is absolute rubbish that she puts forward, as others do. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is absolutely right: this is a red herring. I undertake to share with her all the letters from impartial sources who have written to support our contention that public services, especially the NHS, face no threat whatsoever from TTIP—it is a good idea.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I hope that the Minister is aware of the increasing anxiety of Scottish and indeed Teesside workers about reductions in investment in safety offshore and the failure in many cases of companies to work co-operatively with trade union safety representatives. What recent assessment has she made of safety offshore? What can we say to our constituents to reassure them that the Government are on the case?

Anna Soubry: The hon. Gentleman makes some very important points and I am more than happy to meet him to discuss them, including any allegations that the unions are not being fully engaged with. As he knows, I do not have a difficulty with trade unions, having been a shop steward. I am more than happy to have a meeting to discuss this important matter.

Trade Union Bill

5. Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and Ministers of the Scottish Government on the potential effect on Scotland of measures in the Trade Union Bill.
Oral Answers

10. Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and Ministers in the Scottish Government on the effect on Scotland of the measures proposed by the Trade Union Bill. [904922]

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): The Trade Union Bill is now waiting Royal Assent. It is about employment and industrial relations law, which are reserved matters, and it will apply consistently across the United Kingdom. We have engaged with the Scottish Government through the passage of the Bill, and we will carry on with that work.

Mike Kane: Despite the Trade Union Bill’s worst elements being removed or watered down, it is still a bad Bill. Does the Minister agree that a bad Bill will not make for good industrial relations in Scotland?

Anna Soubry: I do not share the hon. Gentleman’s views on the Bill. It is an excellent Bill and I fully support it and its aims.

Liz McInnes: Parties in both Wales and Scotland have prepared legislative consent memorandums on the Trade Union Bill on the basis that the Bill clearly impinges on devolved competences. In the light of that, does the Minister not now agree that the Bill should be subject to legislative consent motions? What action will the Government take to ensure that similar circumstances do not arise in future?

Anna Soubry: I am reliably informed that that has already happened. The hon. Lady is just not up to date on all of this.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): With the relegation of Labour to third place in last week’s Scottish elections, does the Minister agree that now is exactly the right time to introduce an opt-in system for union members who wish to contribute to political funds rather than it being the default position?

Anna Soubry: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I pay handsome tribute to the outstanding Ruth Davidson. Like the Prime Minister, she is a moderate, sensible, one nation Conservative. She has turned the skies of Scotland blue with, if I may say, a rather pleasing tinge of pink at the edges.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The Government made a number of concessions on the Trade Union Bill, but the Bill still seeks to undermine constructive social partnership and, as such, it is at odds with the democratic will of the people of Scotland and Wales. Given that the Government say that they believe in mutual respect between central Government and the devolved institutions, will they now hold immediate discussions with the devolved institutions about how the Bill will relate to Scotland and Wales?

Anna Soubry: Discussions are always continuing. Again, this is another red herring and the hon. Gentleman is out of touch on this. This Bill is good: it is good for Britain, good for trade unions and good for future working relations.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [904962] Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 11 May.

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others and, in addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mike Kane: Even “fantastically corrupt” Nigeria is asking Britain to clean up its act and introduce beneficial ownership registers in the overseas territories. Will the Prime Minister achieve that tomorrow at the anti-corruption summit?

The Prime Minister: First, I had better check that the microphone is on before speaking. It is probably a good idea.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The answer is yes. We have asked three things of the overseas territories and Crown dependencies: automatic exchange of tax information; a common reporting standard for multinational companies; and central beneficial ownership registries so that UK enforcement can know who really owns the companies that are based there. They have delivered on the first two, and they will be following and delivering on the third. That is what he asked for, and that is exactly what he is getting.

Q2. [904963] Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): In Banbury and Bicester, we have unprecedented housing growth. Does the Prime Minister agree that we must build sufficient starter homes so that the dream of home ownership becomes something to which everybody can really aspire?

The Prime Minister: I thank my constituency neighbour and hon. Friend for raising that question. The fact is that we are building more houses, including more affordable homes, right across England. The legislation going through this House and the other place will ensure that we deliver on our manifesto pledge of 200,000 starter homes. Those are the homes that we want to see—affordable for people to buy. I hope that, even at this late stage, the Labour party and the House of Lords will stop blocking this Bill.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Since we often celebrate great national events in this House, will the Prime Minister join me in wishing Sir David Attenborough a very happy 90th birthday and thanking him for the way in which he has presented nature programmes on television and awakened the ideas of so many people to the fragility of our ecosystem? He has educated a whole generation.

On this side of the House, we are fully aware—[Interruption.] I haven’t asked a question yet. We are fully aware that the European Union has strengthened workers’ rights in many ways. In March, while the Prime Minister was trying to undermine workers’ rights
with his Trade Union Bill, the European Commission put forward proposals to close loopholes in the posting of workers directive that would stop employers exploiting foreign workers and undercutting national rates of pay. Will the Prime Minister confirm that his Government will protect workers and back these reforms to stop the undercutting and the grotesque exploitation of many workers across the continent?

**The Prime Minister:** First of all, I certainly join the right hon. Gentleman in wishing a very happy birthday to David Attenborough. Many of us in this House feel that we grew up with him as our teacher about the natural world and the environment. He is a remarkable man. I am proud to say that the royal Arctic survey ship will be named after David Attenborough. There was strong support for Boaty McBoatface. I think the submarine on the boat will be named Boaty McBoatface but, quite rightly, Attenborough will take top billing.

On the posted workers directive, we are looking at this matter closely and working with our partners. We see some merit in what is proposed. I can tell the right hon. Gentleman today that the yellow card procedure has been invoked by national Parliaments over this, demonstrating the importance of these sorts of safeguards, even more of which we achieved in my renegotiation. The best thing that we can do for workers’ rights in this country is to celebrate the national living wage, introduced by a Tory Government.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** The national minimum wage was introduced by Labour. The national living wage proposed by the Prime Minister’s friend the Chancellor is, frankly, a corruption of the very idea. It is not, in reality, a proper living wage. My question was about the posting of workers directive proposals, which would prevent the grotesque exploitation by unscrupulous employers of workers being moved from one nation to another to undercut wages in the second nation. Will the Prime Minister be absolutely clear: will the British Government support this very important reform to stop this exploitation?

**The Prime Minister:** As I have said, we are working with the Dutch presidency. We think there is merit in a second nation. Will the Prime Minister be absolutely clear: will the British Government support this very important reform to stop this exploitation?

**The Prime Minister:** This is an area where we basically agree with each other about the European Union, so I will try to identify a question in that lot and answer it as positively as I can. First, I completely disagree with the economist Patrick Minford. He wants to see manufacturing industry in our country obliterated. It would be a disastrous step if we followed the advice that he gives. On the City of London, we need the right regulation for the City of London to continue its massive rate of job creation and wealth creation in our country, but we also need to remain members of the single market because it is absolutely vital for this important sector of our economy. I hope that on that, as on the issue of the national living wage, we can find some agreement between us.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** The question that I also put to the Prime Minister, which perhaps he was not listening to, was what he was going to do—[Interjection.] I asked what he was going to do about the UK-administered tax havens that receive large sums of money from dodgy sources, which should and must be closed down, as should any tax evasion in the City of London. We need a British Government who are prepared to chase down this level of corruption.

**The Prime Minister:** This Government have done more than any previous Government to make sure that our overseas territories and Crown dependencies are not tax havens, but behave in a responsible way. As I said earlier, they are now taking part in the automatic exchange of tax information—that did not happen before; they have signed up to a common reporting standard for multinational companies—that did not happen before; and they are getting central registries so that we can find out who owns the companies in each territory. All these things are real progress. Of course, we would like them to go further and have public registries of beneficial ownership, as we are introducing in this country, not because of anything a Labour Government did, but because of a decision by a Conservative Prime Minister. I urge the right hon. Gentleman to be fair on those territories and Crown dependencies: many of them have gone much further even than many developed countries. Indeed, you get more information now out of some of our Crown dependencies and overseas territories than you would get out of the United States—for example, Delaware. So let us be fair on the territories for which we have an obligation and a responsibility. We are making them improve their record and the right hon. Gentleman should acknowledge that.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** A month ago the Prime Minister informed the House that he welcomed the European Union proposals on country-by-country tax transparency reporting. We agreed with that, yet on 26 April Conservative Members of the European Parliament voted against these proposals. Did they not receive a memo from him or what? People expect that people pay their tax in this
country. Tomorrow the European Parliament will be voting again on country-by-country reporting. Can the Prime Minister assure the House that Conservative Members of the European Parliament will support these measures, as he told us they would a month ago?

The Prime Minister: The most important thing is that we support these measures. This Government support the measures. These measures have come forward only because it has been a Conservative Government here in the United Kingdom proposing them. The only area of disagreement, I suspect, between the right hon. Gentleman and myself is that I do not think we should set a minimum tax rate for these countries. It has always been a position of Labour Governments and previous Conservative Governments that although we want to make sure that all these territories behave properly, we do not make them set a minimum tax rate. That is the difference between us. If he wants to swap voting records of Labour MEPs and Tory MEPs, let us have a whole session on it. I have plenty of material here.

Jeremy Corbyn: That was a very long answer—[Interruption.] The Prime Minister could simply have said whether or not he supports the proposals and whether his Conservative MEPs are going to vote for them.

The Prime Minister: The Prime Minister will be very well aware of the concern across the whole country about the question of unaccompanied child refugees across Europe. Their plight is desperate and they are in a very dangerous situation. Everyone’s heart reaches out to them, but we have to do more than that and we have to be practical in our help for them. I got a letter this week from a voluntary worker with child refugees by the name of Hannah. She wrote to me about these children, some of whom have family members in this country. Can the Prime Minister confirm that in response to Lord Dubs’ amendment, there will be no delay whatsoever in accepting 3,000 unaccompanied child refugees into this country to give them the support they need and allow them to enjoy the childhood that they and all our children deserve?

The Prime Minister: We will follow the Dubs amendment—that is now the law of the land. The Dubs amendment says that we have to consult very carefully with local authorities to make sure that, as we take these children in, we are able to house them, clothe them, feed them and make sure they are properly looked after. So we need to look at the capacity of our care system, because if you look at some councils, particularly in Kent and southern England, you see they are already struggling because of the large number of unaccompanied children who have come in.

Just two figures for the right hon. Gentleman, to put this in context. Last year 3,000 unaccompanied children arrived and claimed asylum in the UK, even before the scheme that is being introduced. The second figure is, under the Dublin regulation, children with a connection to the UK can already claim asylum in France or Italy and then come to the UK, and we have accepted 30 such transfers since February. What I can say about Dubs is that there will not be any delay—we will get on with this as fast as we can—but in order to follow the law, we have to talk to our local authorities first.

Q4. [904965] Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): During President Obama’s recent visit, was the Prime Minister able to talk to him about the Chinese dumping of steel and the robust action he has been able to take in the United States to address it, including introducing tariffs of 288%? If so, was his advice, “Keep backing British steel, increase the tariffs and tell the Chinese to go to the back of the line”?

The Prime Minister: I did discuss this issue with President Obama, and both the US and the European Union have taken action against Chinese dumping. If you look at the figures, the excess capacity in China is around 25 times higher than the UK’s entire production. The anti-dumping tariffs we have produced in the EU have been very effective and, in some categories, have reduced Chinese exports by as much as 98%. So my hon. Friend should not believe some of the figures put around that the EU action does not work; it does work, and if we were outside the EU we might be subject to those tariffs ourselves.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): The Prime Minister’s Government were elected with 37% of the vote, so I am sure he would acknowledge the success of Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP in being returned victoriously, for a third time, with 46% of the vote—the highest figure currently of any political party in national elections anywhere in western Europe.

On the anti-corruption summit, has the Prime Minister read the appeals from Nigerian campaigners who say that their “efforts are sadly undermined if countries such as your own are welcoming our corrupt to hide their ill-gotten gains in your luxury homes, department stores, car dealerships, private schools and anywhere else that will accept their cash with no questions asked. The role of London’s property market as vessels to conceal stolen wealth has been exposed in court documents, reports, documentaries and more”? What is the Prime Minister going to do about this?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted to congratulate Nicola Sturgeon on her victory in the Scottish elections, as I am sure the right hon. Gentleman would want to congratulate Ruth Davidson on her stunning performance. We have something in common, because the SNP has gone from majority to minority, while the Conservatives have gone from coalition to majority. Next week he can get up and ask me how we are getting on with ordering some more pandas for Edinburgh zoo—I think that would be a very positive development.

The question the right hon. Gentleman asks about the corruption summit is absolutely right: the whole point of holding this summit in London is to say that action is necessary by developed countries as well as developing countries. One of the steps we are taking—to make sure that foreign companies that own UK property have to declare who the beneficial owner is—will be one of the ways we make sure that plundered money from African countries cannot be hidden in London.

Angus Robertson: It would be helpful if the Prime Minister confirmed that that list will be publicly available and not just accessible for the police. Seeing as how he is prepared to lecture other countries on corruption and probity, will he explain why seven police forces in the UK have launched criminal investigations into Conservative
MPs for potential electoral fraud? That is very serious, so how is it that a Conservative police and crime commissioner can serve in such a role while being under police investigation?

The Prime Minister: First, let us be clear about this anti-corruption summit. Nobody is lecturing anybody. One of the reasons this issue does not get addressed is that countries and politicians are too worried about addressing it knowing that no country is perfect—not, indeed, is any politician. But I think it is right for Britain to take this lead, not least because we meet our 0.7% contribution on aid. I think we are entitled to raise this incredibly important issue. As to what the right hon. Gentleman says about the Electoral Commission, the whole point is that in this country the Electoral Commission is independent. When it comes to operational decisions by police forces, they are independent too. Long may that be the case: that is the hallmark of an incorrupt country.

Q8. [904969] Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I know my right hon. Friend will want to join me in congratulating Katy Bourne, who was re-elected as the Sussex police and crime commissioner last week, topping the poll in Crawley for her work in helping victims. In that respect, will the Prime Minister commit to introducing a British Bill of Rights as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to make that commitment and let me join him in congratulating Katy Bourne and all successful candidates. I think what we saw in the police and crime commissioner elections—[Interruption.] In a minute. What we saw in the police and crime commissioner elections was a very large increase in turnout, sometimes as much as a 25 percentage point increase. I think this new role is bedding in well.

For the sake of completion, I am very happy to congratulate Carwyn Jones, whom I spoke to over the weekend, and Arlene Foster, who will be First Minister of Northern Ireland. I spoke to her and the Deputy First Minister yesterday. And I congratulate Sadiq Khan, who won a very clear victory in London. We all look forward to working with him for the benefit of Londoners.

Q3. [904966] Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): When Hull was left out of the Government’s plans for the rail electrification of the north, Hull businesses got together and produced a privately financed scheme to do the work for the city of culture 2017. It has been with the Department for Transport for two years. Does the Prime Minister think that the Department for Transport’s attitude shows incompetence or indifference to the scheme that has been put forward with private money?

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Lady is being slightly unfair on the Department, not least because passengers will benefit from 500 brand new carriages, and the removal of the outdated and unpopular Pacer trains. Some £1.4 million of investment is going into Hull station to be delivered before it becomes the UK city of culture. I understand that the Department for Transport is considering the case to complete the electrification between Selby and Hull. We make these investments because we have a strong economy and we are investing in our infrastructure.

Q9. [904970] Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): I recently visited Silentnight in Barnoldswick. Its award-winning apprenticeship scheme has now created 40 full-time jobs. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating Silentnight on the success of its scheme, which has helped the company to expand, and allowed it recently to award all of its more than 1,000 employees with an additional £250 thank you bonus?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Silentnight. I remember visiting it with him in 2014. Back then, it employed 800 people. It now employs 1,100 people. That is a good example of a business expanding under this Government. It is a big backer of apprenticeships. Of course, our target is 3 million apprentices in this Parliament.

Q5. [904966] Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Already in 2016, at least 46 women have been murdered in the UK. This number would be much higher if not for specialist refuges. I am standing to beg the Prime Minister to exempt refuge accommodation from the changes to housing benefit beyond 2017. This will certainly close services. I do not want to hear a stock answer about the £40 million over the next four years. He knows and I know that that will not stop refuges shutting. Will he exempt refuges? Will he choose to save lives—please?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises an important point. That is why we delayed the introduction of this change so that we could look at all the possible consequences and make sure we get it right so that we help vulnerable people.

Q12. [904973] Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): HIV infection rates in the UK are on the rise. My right hon. Friend will be aware that NHS England has refused to fund a pre-exposure prophylactic treatment. Will he agree to meet me and leading AIDS charities so that we can review this unacceptable decision?

The Prime Minister: It is right that my hon. Friend raises this. My understanding is that NHS England is considering its commissioning responsibility. I want it to reach a decision on this quickly—this month, if possible—because there is no doubt, as he says, that there is a rising rate of infection, and that these treatments can help and make a difference. We are planning trial sites that are already under way, and we are investing £2 million to support them over the next two years. But he is right to raise this, and I will make sure he gets the meetings he needs to make progress with it.

Q6. [904967] Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): In my first year as an MP, every other person coming to my constituency advice service surgery has been an anxious council tenant, usually mum, dad and two or three children living in a one-bedroom flat, and they are often in tears. They cannot afford to rent in the private market, they cannot afford to buy their council flat, and they absolutely cannot afford a starter home. Can the Prime Minister explain in practical and meaningful terms that I can read to them from Hansard when I go to my surgery on Friday why, in his view, the Housing and Planning Bill will not make their intolerable situation worse?
The Prime Minister: I would say to the hon. and learned Gentleman’s constituents that there is a series of things that I believe will help them. First, making sure that the right to buy is there for housing association tenants as well as council tenants, with the full discounts, makes a difference. Added to that, Help to Buy means that people need a smaller amount of equity to buy their house, and that helps too. Further to that, starter homes will make a difference because they will be more affordable. Added to that, shared accommodation homes means that where you previously needed a deposit of £30,000 to buy a house, you may be able to buy a house now for just a few thousand pounds’ deposit. All of those things make a difference. And for those in estates that need regeneration, we are backing that regeneration, which never happened under a Labour Government.

Q13. [904974] Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): I am proud that this Government have delivered unemployment levels in my constituency at a record low of 1.6%. I am doubly proud that this Government have delivered the Cardiff city deal—a £1.2 billion investment in infrastructure. Does the Prime Minister agree, and does he share my eagerness now to see the M4 relief road, the eastern bay link, and electrification of the City and Valley lines delivered in Wales?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise these issues, because the money is there, and now, frankly, with a new Welsh Government in place, we need the action, particularly on the M4, which is a vital transport artery. We have given the Welsh Government £500 million in increased borrowing powers. The delay in upgrading the M4 is damaging business in south Wales, and frankly it is high time that the Welsh Government got on with it.

Q7. [904968] Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): The “Why young Syrians choose to fight” report claims that it is money rather than religious fervour that acts as a recruiter for Daesh. While the Syrian army pays about $100 per month, often late, Daesh can pay $300 a month, on time, due to its funding and sophistication. Does the Prime Minister agree that much more needs to be done to offer alternative economic avenues for Syrians, to disrupt flows of funding, and to undermine the brains behind Daesh?

The Prime Minister: I agree with what the hon. Gentleman says about the importance of economic development and aid, and that is why we have a very generous aid budget, but clearly right now in Syria it is very difficult to get aid support and development through. Where I take issue with him is that if we see this purely as Daesh recruiting people because it is paying them, we would miss the point that the cancer of Islamist extremist violence is damaging our world and our country not just in Syria but in other places too, and we have to understand the nature of that extremism if we are going to defeat it.

Q14. [904975] Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Havant’s new Dunsbury Hill Farm business park will create about 3,500 new jobs. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating its first new tenant, Fat Face, and support job creation across Britain?

The Prime Minister: I would say to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents that there is a series of things that I believe will help them. First, making sure that the right to buy is there for housing association tenants as well as council tenants, with the full discounts, makes a difference. Added to that, Help to Buy means that people need a smaller amount of equity to buy their house, and that helps too. Further to that, starter homes will make a difference because they will be more affordable. Added to that, shared accommodation homes means that where you previously needed a deposit of £30,000 to buy a house, you may be able to buy a house now for just a few thousand pounds’ deposit. All of those things make a difference. And for those in estates that need regeneration, we are backing that regeneration, which never happened under a Labour Government.

Q10. [904971] Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Prime Minister said as Leader of the Opposition that the UK was fast becoming a “surveillance state” with powers that would “cause concern under the most oppressive regimes”, and he promised to “sweep the whole rotten edifice away.” But he has completely U-turned, and his Investigatory Powers Bill proposes to retain a record of every website visited by anyone in the UK. Why has the Prime Minister changed from being the self-proclaimed defender of civil liberties in opposition to championing ineffective mass surveillance in government?

The Prime Minister: I completely disagree with the hon. Gentleman, and I hope that he will follow and listen to the debates that take place on this vital Bill. The fact is that if we want to make sure that we can keep our country safe, just as we have been able to see the communications data when two people talk to each other on a mobile phone or a fixed phone, the same has to be true if that conversation is taking place between people visiting an internet site. Is he happy for plots to be hatched, terrorism to be planned and murders to be arranged because people are using an internet site rather than a telephone? My answer to that would be no. We have got to modernise our capabilities to keep our country safe, and that is what this Bill is about.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): My right hon. Friend said in November 2015: “Access to the internet shouldn’t be a luxury; it should be a right”. The accompanying press release went on to say that every home and business could “have access to fast broadband by the end of this Parliament.” Will my right hon. Friend say today, unequivocally—no ifs or buts—that this commitment will be honoured?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid my hon. Friend is right about that. The claimant count in my constituency has fallen by a staggering 52% since 2010, and we need to keep on with this by making sure that we are expanding the training and the apprenticeships that help people to get the jobs that are being created.

Q11. [904972] Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Will the Prime Minister give me a personal commitment to work with the Scottish Government to deliver funding for a Tay city deal for Dundee and the surrounding area?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give that commitment. I think city deals are working. They are working in Scotland, and I was very proud to be there with the Aberdeen city deal. I make the point that, obviously, city deals between the Scottish Government, the UK Government and the city concerned can only work if we are all part of one happy United Kingdom.
Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Respected journalist Laura Kuenssberg has been subjected to an online hate campaign, which appears to be a sexist witch hunt to silence her. Increasingly, this is a tool used against people in public life by those who take an opposing view. Will my right hon. Friend condemn this kind of harassment, and will he work with media and social media platforms to preserve the right to speak freely without intimidation or hate?

The Prime Minister: We must be able to speak freely and we must have a robust and lively democracy, but some of the things that people say on Twitter, knowing that they are in some way anonymous, are frankly appalling. People should be ashamed of the sort of sexist bullying that often takes place.

Q15. [904976] Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Last week, London elected a new Mayor with an overwhelming mandate to tackle London’s housing crisis. It is a crisis that many of us fear the Housing and Planning Bill will make worse. Last April, the Prime Minister launched his manifesto, promising to replace sold council houses with affordable homes in the same area. Why, then, will he oppose an amendment to the Housing and Planning Bill this afternoon that would effectively implement last year’s manifesto commitment?

The Prime Minister: Let me again congratulate Sadiq Khan on his victory and say how much we are looking forward to working with him on the issues that matter to Londoners, whether it is transport, housing or keeping London safe. I put the question back to the hon. Lady: our Housing and Planning Bill means that every high-value property sold will mean two new affordable homes in London, so why is it that the Labour party here and in the other place are opposing something that will mean more houses, more affordable housing and more home ownership? That is the truth. They talk a good game, but, in the end, they are the enemies of aspiration.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): During military operations in Afghanistan, British forces were heavily reliant on locally employed interpreters, who constantly put themselves in harm’s way alongside our people. I saw with my own eyes during Herrick 9 just how brave these interpreters were. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is a stain on our country’s honour that we have abandoned a large number of them to be threatened by the Taliban? Some have been murdered and others have had to flee their homes, in fear of their lives. We owe the interpreters a huge debt of gratitude and honour, and we must provide safety and sanctuary for them here.

The Prime Minister: We debated and discussed around the National Security Council table in the coalition Government and then announced in the House of Commons a scheme to make sure that those people who had helped our forces with translation and other services were given the opportunity of coming to the UK. We set up two schemes: one to encourage that, but also another scheme, a very generous scheme, to try to encourage those people who either wanted to stay or had not been translators for a long enough period to stay in Afghanistan and help to rebuild that country.

I think it is important to have both schemes in place, rather than simply saying that everyone in any way involved can come immediately to the UK. Let us back Afghans to rebuild their own country.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The Prime Minister has confirmed to me that should we leave the EU, the European convergence funding for the very poorest parts of Wales would of course cease. Will he now confirm that in such a case the UK Government would make up the difference?

The Prime Minister: The point I would make to the hon. Gentleman, as I would to anyone asking a question about what happens were we to leave, is that I do not think you can give a guarantee. I am a profound believer in our United Kingdom. I want to go on making sure that poorer regions and parts of our country are properly supported. If, as I think is the case, we find that our economy would be hit by leaving and our tax receipts would be hit by leaving, that is obviously going to impact the amount of funding that we can put into agriculture, research or, indeed, poorer parts of our country. That is why I think the safe, sensible and right option is to vote to remain in a reformed European Union.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May I support the Prime Minister on his comments about Nigeria and Afghanistan, and ask him to stop pouring hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money into those and other corrupt countries until they have cleaned up their act? While he is at it, will he tell us where he has the European Union in his league table of corruption, given that it has not had its accounts signed off for 20 years?

The Prime Minister: I thank, as ever, my hon. Friend for his help and support, and for his tips on diplomacy as well, which are useful given the past 24 hours. I would say to him that the leaders of countries such as Nigeria and Afghanistan are battling hard against very corrupt systems and countries. In both their cases they have made some remarkable steps forward, and that is why I am so keen to welcome them to the anti-corruption conference in London.

Where I part company with my hon. Friend is that I do not think it would be right to withdraw the aid that we give because, frankly, problems in those countries come back and haunt us here, whether they are problems of migration or problems of terrorism and all the rest of it. We are a country involved in a dangerous global world, and I see our aid budget, at 0.7%, alongside our defence budget, at 2% of our GDP, as ways of keeping us safe and prosperous in a dangerous world, as well as ways of fulfilling our important moral responsibilities.

Several hon. Membersrose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am afraid the amount of noise regularly in the Chamber makes it necessary to put out Barclays premier league matches in the provision of injury time. It is a pleasure to call Gill Furniss.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Twenty seven years ago in my constituency, we saw the country’s biggest sporting disaster. It is clear...
that we will not have the full truth about Hillsborough until we have the full truth about Orgreave and the policing of the miners’ strike. Will the Prime Minister accept the call by the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign and initiate an inquiry?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has met that group, is considering the points they have put forward and will come to her conclusions at the right time.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Business leaders in Cornwall, and indeed up and down the country, are awaiting news of progress on the decision about airport expansion in the south-east. Following this morning’s announcement by Heathrow airport that it now accepts all the Airport Commission’s recommendations, will the Prime Minister update the House on when we can expect a decision? Does he agree with me that a third runway at Heathrow offers the best opportunity for growth, jobs and the future prosperity of our country?

The Prime Minister: May I first—one of my many unforced errors in the past 24 hours—apologise to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss)? I should of course have welcomed her to the House of Commons and congratulated her on her by-election victory. She has lost no time in speaking up for her constituents in a very powerful and very accomplished way.

Let me say to my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) that, as we announced earlier this year, there are air quality issues that need to be resolved. We are on our way to working out how to resolve them, and when we do, we can come back to the House and announce what will happen next.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): My constituent’s mother was killed in 1981. At the time, it was covered up as a suicide pact, but 18 years later it was uncovered that she had actually been murdered by my constituent’s father and his mistress. I do not think that anyone in this House will be able to imagine the pain and suffering that she and her family have had to endure. They are now having to relive that pain, because ITV is dramatising their whole ordeal, completely against her wishes, using not only the real names of her family but her own real name. I have raised this with ITV and with Ofcom, and, as far as I can see, no rules have been broken, but does the Prime Minister agree that victims’ voices should have a far greater role in any account of their tragedy? Will he meet me and my constituent to discuss what more could have been done in this case and how we can strengthen regulation in future to protect victims?

The Prime Minister: I was not aware of the case that the hon. Lady rightly raises. I remember from my time working in the television industry that there are occasions when decisions are made that can cause a huge amount of hurt and upset to families. I will discuss this case with the Culture Secretary to bring it to his attention and see whether there is anything more—apart from the conversations that she has had with ITV and with Ofcom, which is a powerful regulator—that can be done.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Yesterday Lord Prior spoke up for vaping as a way of getting off cigarettes; so has the Royal College of Physicians. Why are we bringing in the Brussels diktat that says that we must include vaping in the tobacco directive?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to look at this issue closely. It is necessary to differentiate between smoking and vaping, because they have very different health effects. I actually think that that is what is being achieved, but I will look into this carefully and will write to my hon. Friend.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Lastly, Mr Tim Farron. [Interruption.] Order. However irritating the hon. Gentleman may be to Government Back Benchers, he has a right to be heard and he will be heard.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am fantastically grateful to you, Mr Speaker. I heard the Prime Minister on two occasions this afternoon congratulate the new Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, and I would like to repeat those congratulations myself. The Prime Minister did not, however, apologise for the disgraceful racist campaign the Conservative party chose to run in that election. Will he take the opportunity to apologise for deliberately dividing communities in order to win cheap votes?

The Prime Minister: It is a great way to end the Session—getting a lesson in clean campaigning from the Liberal Democrats.
The proposals in our White Paper are the result of one of the largest and most open consultations ever conducted. I have always been clear that I will publish our proposals as soon as we are ready to do so, and at a time when the House has the opportunity to debate them, and I look forward to doing so tomorrow.

Maria Eagle: The BBC is one of the most valued and successful institutions ever created in the UK, and it belongs to the people of this country who pay for it. It has levels of public approval that any politician would die for, and it is the linchpin of a unique ecology of broadcasting in this country, which enables the creative industries in Britain to grow at twice the level of the rest of the economy, exporting more content and employing more people than its size would suggest possible. It enables the UK to project soft power, and it creates a huge amount of good will for Britain throughout the world.

The Secretary of State has been displaying seemingly implacable hostility to the BBC during the charter renewal process, and he has also been avoiding Parliament. He had to be dragged to the House after weeks of almost daily leaked briefings to the media. He has not come willingly to Parliament, and he seems intent on using his brief sojourn in office not to strengthen the BBC but to diminish it; not to see value in it, but to denigrate it; not to enable it, but to control it.

The Secretary of State claims time and again that he is a supporter of the BBC, but he recently told Cambridge students that the disappearance of the BBC was a “tempting prospect”. He did not like the results of the public consultation, so he is simply ignoring them, but the public love the BBC and want it to carry on doing what it has been doing so well for more than 90 years.

May I finish by giving the Secretary of State a bit of advice? It is not too late for the Secretary of State to start listening to the public. Indeed, he had better do so. He will not be forgiven, and nor will his party, if he continues on the path, which he has been briefing to the newspapers, that will lead to the destruction of the BBC as our much loved national broadcaster and turn it instead into a mouthpiece of the Government of the day.

Mr Whittingdale: I agree with the shadow Secretary of State’s opening comments. The BBC has a very trusted place in British life and does a huge amount to support creative industries, and its global influence is enormous. We agree on those things and I am determined to preserve them, but to say that I have been dragged to Parliament is a little bit rich when it has always been the intention for us to make a full statement when the House is sitting—that will take place tomorrow.

The shadow Secretary of State set out three concerns on which she said she would judge our White Paper. I am not going to reveal the contents of the White Paper before it is published, but I can tell her that she will find that we agree with her about all three of the concerns she outlined and that they will be met.

We have had an extensive consultation and have taken account of it. The hon. Lady has asked legitimate questions. I would simply say to her that they are legitimate questions for tomorrow when she has had the chance to read the White Paper rather than for now, when she has read comments in the newspapers that range from complete fantasy to others that are quite well informed but certainly not informed by me or my Department.
We occasionally criticise the BBC for repeats and insist on original content wherever possible, but I suspect we will have an awful lot of repeats tomorrow from the hon. Lady, because that is when she should ask the questions and when I shall be happy to provide her with answers.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that that worldwide reputation of the BBC, which he and I admire, depends above all on its obvious independence, and the fact that it is seen to be independent of the Government and all other pressure groups? Will he reassure me, as he tried to reassure us a few moments ago, that tomorrow’s White Paper will reinforce that reputation, and that it will be plain on the face of it that there is no threat to the BBC?

Mr Whittingdale: I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend. I have always made it clear that editorial independence is an incredibly important principle and that we will do nothing to undermine it. Indeed, I hope that, when he sees the White Paper tomorrow, he will find that we have done our best to strengthen it in some areas.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Members on both sides of the House wait with some trepidation for the publication tomorrow of the White Paper on the future of the BBC, but the Government should be in no doubt about the support for editorially independent public service broadcasting throughout the United Kingdom.

There often seems to be something of a gulf between some of the whackier notions floated by the Government via the press and broadcasting reality. One of the most bizarre must surely be the idea that the BBC should desist from broadcasting popular programmes at the same time that ITV broadcasts popular programmes—presumably, the BBC should show only dull, unpopular programmes at those times. There are reports that that remains a sticking point between the Government and the director-general. Will the Secretary of State reassure us that there is no truth in that absurd suggestion?

Mr Whittingdale: Yes.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I and my Committee—the Culture, Media and Sport Committee—were concerned earlier this year that the process of releasing the White Paper might be delayed by the volume of responses that the Secretary of State has received, and I congratulate him on publishing it tomorrow. As he and the House will know, my Committee made several serious recommendations on governance, many of which were picked up by the Clementi committee and developed. Will the Secretary of State reassure me that the selection process for the crucial role of the chair of the new unitary board will be as wide ranging, robust and independent as possible?

Mr Whittingdale: I am grateful to my hon. Friend—he is right that it has taken a considerable time to go through all the consultation responses. We have had valuable recommendations both from his Committee and from the Committee in the other House. It was always the case that we would try to make the statement as soon as possible, and when the House is sitting. I am delighted that we are in a position to do so tomorrow. My hon. Friend will see what we suggest on appointments to the new BBC board, if that is the recommendation in the White Paper. I will be happy to talk to him about it further once the White Paper has been published.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The pre-briefing, from wherever it came in the Government, to the BBC-hostile press has not helped the Secretary of State’s cause. If the White Paper published tomorrow follows the recommendations of the excellent Select Committee report published last year—he chaired the Committee at the time and signed up to the report—I will support it. However, if there is any suggestion whatever of anything that intrudes on the BBC’s independence, he will have the fight of his life on his hands.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is asking the Secretary of State whether he agrees with himself.

Mr Whittingdale: I share the right hon. Gentleman’s view that the report issued by the Select Committee last year was excellent—he played a very important role in framing the conclusions—but I repeat what I said: I am committed to the editorial independence of the BBC, and I hope that, when he looks at the White Paper, he finds the reassurance he seeks.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): Earlier this week, the Prime Minister described the BBC as one of the most recognised brands on the planet—it is indeed. It is also one of the British institutions recognised worldwide as a great achievement of this country and great advert for it. It is clear from Members on both sides of the House that one key reason for that long-term success is the BBC’s independence. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State assure us that nothing in the appointments system or the board system in the White Paper exposes the BBC to greater direct interference from any Government, because that would be a hugely retrograde step?

Mr Whittingdale: I am repeating this but I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. I am repeating this but I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. Friend about the importance of editorial independence. On the appointments process, he will be aware that BBC Trust members were entirely appointed by the Government, as were BBC governors before them. However, the BBC board is a different beast, and I hope he will find that we have taken steps to ensure that BBC independence is beyond doubt.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Parents throughout the country value the BBC’s children’s channels, CBeebies and CBBC, because they are free from adverts for low-cost loans from Wonga and expensive toys. Like the NHS, the BBC is a world-class institution and the envy of other nations. If it is not broken, the Secretary of State must not fix it.

Mr Whittingdale: I share the hon. Lady’s admiration for the programming that the BBC produces for children, particularly given that most of the commercial sector has withdrawn from children’s programming. I consider that to be a very important part of the BBC’s public service role, and I hope she finds measures in the White Paper that she is able to welcome.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I doubt whether any hon. Member on either side of the House is not a major supporter of the BBC, but as someone who
served on the National Heritage Committee and the Culture, Media and Sport Committee for many years, and as someone who worked for the BBC, I find some of the points made by the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) a bit rich. I remember some of the appointments made to the board of governors by Tony Blair. She commented on the suggestion that the BBC should be showing programmes that are different from those shown by ITV and not competing, but that point was made by Chris Smith when he was Culture, Media and Sport Secretary in Tony Blair’s Government.

Mr Whittingdale: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for those observations, which were well made. I hope he comes along and makes some more tomorrow.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman will not require much encouragement if experience is anything by which to judge.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): S4C provides popular programming in Welsh—in fact, it is as popular as possible—and is largely funded by the BBC. Is the Secretary of State concerned that his proposals as reported widely in Wales are likely to hamper S4C’s ability to fulfil that unique prime function?

Mr Whittingdale: I am concerned if those reports are circulating in Wales, but I hope there will be reassurance tomorrow. I was pleased to have the opportunity to visit S4C just a few weeks ago and I share the hon. Gentleman’s regard for its programming. He will be aware that we have announced that we will be reviewing S4C once we have completed the BBC charter review. That, too, will be with the aim of seeing how we can strengthen and sustain it.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) referred to his past. In 1957, when T S Eliot and the late E M Forster were arguing, I was a 12-year-old who put stamps on the communications. Trusting in the Government to bring forward a decent White Paper, I ask the Secretary of State to clarify when Channel 4 might come up for renewal. Indeed, I hope it will be felt that they strengthen public service broadcasting. I look forward to my hon. Friend’s contribution tomorrow.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): There is no doubt about the level of public support for the BBC’s independence, impartiality and fairness. At a time when it is being undermined by its competitors and attacked by the hard right of the Conservative party, as we have just heard, and of course by the bitter practitioners of the new and kinder politics on the hard left, not to mention the crazed conspiracy theorists in the SNP north of the border and UKIP in England, is it not really important for mainstream politicians to stand up for the BBC’s right to do its job and defend its staff from the terrible bullying that we have recently seen?

Mr Whittingdale: I sometimes sympathise with the BBC when it comes to maintaining impartiality at a time when there are so many diverse views, making it increasingly hard to strike the balance between them. Impartiality and objectivity are nevertheless absolutely the cornerstone of the BBC’s reputation, and I hope that that will always continue to be the case.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the period of charter renewal is a good time to consider what the BBC can do better in the future, even though it is a much-loved national institution, given that this is recognised by the BBC itself and there is widespread concern about the need for reform of the BBC’s governance?

Mr Whittingdale: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, who has contributed to the excellent Select Committee report on this matter. I hope that he finds that our White Paper proposals take account of it. They are intended to strengthen the BBC and ensure that it performs better in the areas where it might not have fulfilled its potential to date.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am proud to host the BBC’s Scotland headquarters at Pacific Quay in my constituency. It is a great facility, providing many jobs within the city of Glasgow and more widely, with lots of production companies also using the facilities there. I want to ask specifically about BBC Alba. Its present schedule provides for 73% repeats and it is able to produce only 4.4 hours of original output a week.

Mr Whittingdale: I am sympathetic to those comments. Arrangements for appointments to the board will be made clear tomorrow, but the importance of diversity is central to the White Paper and it applies to those who work for the BBC, those who appear on BBC programmes and indeed those who watch them.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Following the lefty-lovey hysteria at the weekend, does my right hon. Friend agree that scrapping the discredited BBC Trust, asking for more transparency in a publicly funded organisation and wanting the BBC to be distinctive and impartial is hardly the end of public service broadcasting as we know it?

Mr Whittingdale: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I think he will find that our proposals certainly do not represent the end of public service broadcasting. Indeed, I hope it will be felt that they strengthen public service broadcasting. I look forward to my hon. Friend’s contribution tomorrow.
BBC Alba’s ask for the charter renewal is to be able to produce 10 hours a week. It is a modest request to the Government, and I very much hope that the Secretary of State will be able to take it into account. The channel has grown a great deal, reaching 700,000 people a week, but it needs extra support to grow its audience further.

Mr Whittingdale: I had a useful meeting with the chairman and chief executive of MG Alba not long ago. I agree with the hon. Lady that they do an excellent job in broadcasting Gaelic. The Government remain committed to that, but the hon. Lady will need to wait until tomorrow. We certainly recognise the importance of what she says, but the funding is to some extent a matter for the BBC.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s words of reassurance on editorial independence. Will he also provide reassurance on regional broadcasting and its continuing importance for the BBC?

Mr Whittingdale: I very much agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of BBC regional and local broadcasting. When it comes to BBC local radio in particular, it is difficult to imagine that the commercial sector would ever provide the sort of news broadcasting and local community information that the BBC provides. This is certainly one of the BBC’s strengths, which I hope to see continue and strengthen even further in the future.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): As part of the ongoing review and as we await tomorrow’s response to the consultation, will the Secretary of State confirm—it is important for regional broadcasting—that collaboration between BBC Northern Ireland and Irish broadcaster RTÉ will continue?

Mr Whittingdale: Again, I do not want to pre-empt the White Paper. That sort of issue is very much one for the BBC, but we very much support the general importance of the BBC working in partnership and collaboration with other broadcasting organisations.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): In common with most Members, I fully respect the production values of the BBC. Does my right hon. Friend agree, though, that it is only proper to ask the BBC to review its governance arrangements and ensure that it continues to have a distinctive approach in the face of a fast-changing digital world?

Mr Whittingdale: My hon. Friend is right on both counts. There is, I think, universal agreement that the existing governance structure has not proved to be sufficiently effective, so there is a need for a new system of governance. My hon. Friend also rightly makes the point that we live in an extraordinarily fast-changing media landscape, in which people are changing the way they consume television. If we compare that with the position 10 years ago, we find the current landscape transformed—and it is likely that the pace of change will continue. That is why the BBC needs to be adaptable and ready for that future.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State assure us that he will not listen to all the hard-line cranks and the obsessive detractors of the BBC who are always knocking this important institution, much loved and much valued by mainstream Britain? The BBC actually raises the standard and the quality of output from its competitors, so hobbling the BBC will do nothing but reduce that quality.

Mr Whittingdale: I have no wish to hobble the BBC. We have sought to listen to all the views expressed and to take account of them. All I can do now is invite the hon. Gentleman to come to the House tomorrow so that he can hear what we have proposed.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): With wonderful BBC dramas such as “Happy Valley” and “Peaky Blinders” being filmed in my beautiful part of Yorkshire, will the Secretary of State assure me that the White Paper will enhance support and encourage yet more BBC TV production in the regions?

Mr Whittingdale: I was fortunate enough to be able to visit the set of “Peaky Blinders” recently, although they were filming in Liverpool rather than in my hon. Friend’s constituency. This provides a very good example of fine and popular BBC drama—exactly the sort of thing at which the BBC excels—and I hope that it will continue to produce such programmes for a long time.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The people of Wales are true to the BBC, but the stories of their lives are progressively going untold. Will the Secretary of State commit to increase the hours of English language broadcasting made both in Wales and for Wales?

Mr Whittingdale: The importance of serving the needs of all the nations and regions of the United Kingdom is central to the BBC, and, indeed, plays a major part in our White Paper. Precisely how that is done is largely a matter for the BBC itself, but, as the hon. Lady will see, we will have a little more to say about it tomorrow.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his words of reassurance, and particularly for what he said to my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) about local radio. In the last Parliament, I led a very oversubscribed Westminster Hall debate opposing cuts to BBC local radio services. Even the BBC Trust seemed surprised at the strength of cross-party feeling in support of local radio. I look forward to my right hon. Friend’s statement tomorrow, but what more can he tell us about the importance of local radio?

Mr Whittingdale: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Local radio performs an extremely valuable function, particularly when there are crises such as the flooding that occurred in the north of England. During the flooding, it was essential that people were able to obtain information about how they could receive help and what the scale of the problem was, and BBC local radio played a critical part in providing that information. I am therefore a great supporter of BBC local radio. As for the allocation of the budget, that is largely a matter for the BBC. We do not tell the BBC how to divide up
the funds that are available to it. However, I hope that it will continue to give local radio the priority that it deserves.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I speak as one of the old lefty luvvies who were advertised to earlier. We were under the impression that last July the Secretary of State had reached an agreement with the BBC that there would be no top-slicing of the licence fee. Will he tell us whether that agreement still holds?

Mr Whittingdale: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the agreement that we reached with the BBC last July stands, and nothing in the White Paper will change that.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that, given its clear remit to educate, entertain and inform the British public, the BBC plays a pivotal role in British society, and does he agree that, as the way in which we consume education, entertainment and information evolves and changes, so must the BBC? Is that not what the White Paper is all about?

Mr Whittingdale: I do agree with my hon. Friend. As I said earlier, the pace of technological change is very rapid. The way in which people consume television today is very different from what it was 10 years ago, but I have absolutely no doubt that by the time the charter is next renewed, it will have changed still further. Of course the BBC must take account of that, as must every other broadcaster.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): As the Secretary of State may know, S4C is the only television channel in the United Kingdom that broadcasts in Welsh, and its continued existence is very important. Will its future funding and governance be considered as part of the charter renewal process, or will those issues be stuck in the long grass, with just a few little words said about them afterwards?

Mr Whittingdale: I agree that S4C makes a valuable contribution to the broadcasting landscape. It is appreciated throughout Wales and in other parts of the UK, and I believe that it has a considerable audience in Patagonia. As I said earlier, once the charter has been renewed we will conduct a further review of S4C which will cover all aspects, including its governance, its remit and, indeed, its funding.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): There is no existential threat to the BBC. This debate has been characterised by the sort of hype that we have heard today, particularly from the left. Does my right hon. Friend agree that in return for a guaranteed £4 billion a year, plus BBC Worldwide, it is perfectly reasonable for the British public to expect a bit of belt-tightening, more accountability than the BBC Trust currently offers, a little injection of entrepreneurship, and, above all, a return to some of the even-handedness that characterised the first 40 years of the BBC?

Mr Whittingdale: I do agree with my hon. Friend. The BBC is privileged to receive £3.7 billion of licence fee funding, and, indeed, additional income. Obviously it is important that that money is spent wisely, that we seek to improve efficiency wherever possible, and that we also seek greater transparency in respect of the way in which the money is spent. All those things are priorities for us, and we will be addressing them tomorrow.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): There is obviously a feeling that the Secretary of State should not seek to exert undue influence in the wrong direction when it comes to the future of the BBC, but may I suggest that intervention would be welcome in one context—that is, were he to advise that the people of the midlands should be given a much fairer and more equitable share of the return from the licence contributions that they make?

Mr Whittingdale: I am aware of the strength of feeling about the matter in the midlands in particular, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Culture and the Digital Economy responded to a Westminster Hall debate about it. Again, this is largely up to the BBC, but we feel strongly about the importance of ensuring that the BBC serves all nations and regions of the United Kingdom, as we will make clear in the White Paper.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Having debated the future of the BBC a few days ago on the radio with my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), I yield to none in my willingness to go the extra mile in support of it—and I hope I am not one of the lefty luvvies to whom my hon. Friend referred. I thank the Secretary of State for meeting me to listen to some of my concerns. Given that I am now reassured, does he agree that it might have been better for Opposition Members to wait 24 hours so that they could be educated and informed in the same way?

Mr Whittingdale: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. I was happy to be able to discuss some of his concerns with him and, I hope, to set his mind at rest, and I shall be happy to do the same for any other Members who have concerns. I would suggest to them, however, that it would be sensible to wait until they have seen what we actually propose, rather than some of the somewhat wild speculation that has appeared in the newspapers.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Virtually everyone agrees that the retention of a high-quality, independent public sector broadcaster is essential. Does the Secretary of State agree, however, that one aspect of the £3.7 billion budget to which he has alluded is that it comes from the public purse, and does he also agree that greater transparency should be at the very top of both the BBC’s agenda and the agenda that he will announce tomorrow?

Mr Whittingdale: I agree with both those points, and they will be on the agenda tomorrow.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): I was, once upon a time, a messenger at the BBC, so I know my way around Broadcasting House very slightly. May I add to the argument for greater transparency by suggesting that we should have some understanding of how much senior managers in the BBC are being paid? My local journalists down in Devon would certainly be interested in learning about that.
Mr Whittingdale: I agree that transparency is very important, especially when public money is involved. Obviously, over a certain level, information about the remuneration packages of Members of Parliament, and, indeed, those of people who work for the Government throughout the public sector, is made public. The BBC already publishes the figures for its senior management, but I share my hon. Friend’s wish for there to be as much transparency as possible.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The Secretary of State has said that he recognises the importance of the BBC’s reflecting the geographical diversity of the regions of the United Kingdom, and, indeed, recognises the anger that exists in the midlands about the fact that BBC has not provided fair shares in that region, either in terms of investment or in terms of its operation and breadth of operation. I realise that he cannot say precisely what will be in the White Paper tomorrow, but can he tell us today what his approach will be in trying to influence those factors? May I also suggest that there is a job of work that can be done at Channel 4 to ensure that it has a greater geographical reach? Moving its headquarters to Birmingham might be a step in the right direction.

Mr Whittingdale: Obviously I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman today what will be in the White Paper that we are publishing tomorrow. Moreover, as I said earlier, some of those questions are for the BBC rather than the Government to determine. However, I reiterate that the need for broadcasters to serve all the nations and regions is a very important criterion, which we will be stressing to the BBC. I also hear what the hon. Gentleman says about Channel 4.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The cuts to local authority funding have created a crisis in the availability of regional arts and culture. In the BBC, however, we have a national institution that enables people to have access to the best, irrespective of where they live or what they earn. Does not the Secretary of State understand that by chipping away at the independence and the finances of the BBC, he is increasing unequal access, and that that is why he has created such a big backlash?

Mr Whittingdale: I hope that the hon. Lady will wait until the publication of the White Paper tomorrow before she makes any comment about the independence of the funding. I agree with her about the important role that the BBC plays in supporting the creative sector and the arts in this country, and that is something that I want to see continue.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Secretary of State recognise that the BBC is internationally renowned for its independence and its quality programmes that entertain, inform and challenge? Does he also understand that any attempts by the Government to play the fat controller by, for instance, packing the board, interfering with programme scheduling or top-slicing the licence fee would risk inflicting severe damage on the BBC’s reputation?

Mr Whittingdale: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that I have no ambition to become the fat controller.

Mr Speaker: It is always useful to have a bit of information.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State refer to the important role of regional radio. I want to highlight the role played by James Hoggarth, who broadcast for eight hours straight from Radio Humberside when the BBC studio in York was flooded in December, providing a vital public service and emergency information. I very much hope that the White Paper will contain references to the important emergency service that BBC local radio provides.

Mr Whittingdale: I very much agree. As I indicated to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), my constituents are deeply concerned about local and regional news provision. Can the Secretary of State assure us that tomorrow’s White Paper will not impinge on the independence or the resources of local news provision?

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), my constituents are deeply concerned about local and regional news provision. Can the Secretary of State assure us that tomorrow’s White Paper will not impinge on the independence or the resources of local news provision?

Mr Whittingdale: I say again that I will not reveal the contents of the White Paper, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I do not think he has any cause for concern.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a testimony to the quality of the BBC’s programming that BBC Worldwide brought in £226.5 million of funds to the BBC last year. That is the equivalent of £10 for each licence fee payer. Can the Secretary of State convey to the House of Commons that he has no intention of selling off any aspect of the BBC’s commercial arm?

Mr Whittingdale: Again, I invite the hon. Gentleman to read what we actually say about this in the White Paper tomorrow. Where I agree with him is that the BBC does have an extremely valuable asset and that it should exploit that in order to maximise the return and reduce the pressure on the licence fee.
Housing and Planning Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Mr Speaker: I draw the attention of the House to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendment 47E. I must also inform the House that the motion relating to Lords amendment 47E is certified as relating exclusively to England. If the House divides on the certified motion, a double majority will be required for the motion to be passed. I call the Minister to move to disagree with Lords amendment 47E.

Clause 72

REDUCTION OF PAYMENT BY AGREEMENT

1.24 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis): I beg to move. That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 47E.

I should also like to inform the House that I am placing in the House Library today the Department’s analysis on the application of Standing Order 830 in respect of the Lords amendment to the Housing and Planning Bill. Yet again, we are here to defend our Bill and to make it clear that it delivers on our manifesto. I thank the other place for not continuing their opposition to starter homes, but this is the third time we have had to vote to confirm a key manifesto commitment, so I do not intend to detain the House for too long. I know that I do not have to remind the House of what we said in our manifesto, as I outlined those commitments last week and again earlier this week.

The Lords have scrutinised the Bill more than adequately, and I thank them for their efforts, but this is no longer scrutiny: this is a wrecking amendment. Enough is enough; it is time to stop. Mr Speaker, you have again certified that this amendment is financially privileged. As I set out earlier this week, it is contrary to convention for the House of Lords to send back an amendment in lieu that clearly invites the same response of financial privilege from this House. Yet on this issue it has chosen to do exactly that, not once but twice. A number of noble Lords rightly voiced their concern yesterday that the Lords were being invited to transgress constitutional proprieties, and I hope that this House will agree that the Lords amendment to the Housing and Planning Bill is a wrecking amendment. Enough is enough; it is time to stop. Mr Speaker, you have again certified that this amendment is financially privileged.

The Lords have said that they insist on limiting new affordable homes to a restricted product aimed at one particular part of the housing market. They have said that they believe that the Government have suggested schemes that would provide social rented housing. The Government have said that they are simply honouring their election manifesto, yet the relevant §106 agreements.

I should like to inform the House of Lords yesterday evening:

“It has been argued previously that this is unnecessary, since Ministers have given a commitment. If that is the case, it ought not to be controversial.” —[Official Report, House of Lords, 10 May 2016: Vol. 771, c. 1687.]

If the Government do not accept this like-for-like replacement, they need to explain why; otherwise, it will be clear that this is no more than another raid on local authorities’ finances, putting greater pressure on already-pressured local services. Shelter has calculated that, to deliver the estimated £4.5 billion of receipts identified by the Government, 23,500 vacant council properties a year will need to be sold. That is nearly a third of all vacant stock each year. Without a commitment in the Bill, there will be a huge loss of genuinely affordable homes as the Government sound the death knell for social housing. The Government have said that they are simply honouring their election manifesto, yet the relevant passage commits to a replacement, which is not in the Bill. The Bill and Government policy will make it near impossible for the delivery of new social rented and affordable rented housing as the new starter homes requirement will push social rented housing out of section 106 agreements.

The second part of the amendment seeks to give local authorities the opportunity to make a case, given local need, to replace a social rented home with another social rented home—if a local authority decides not to make such a case, that is fine, but if it wants to go for a different mix of affordable housing options, it can. The amendment would provide authorities with greater flexibility and expand opportunities for affordable housing. I had hoped that the Government would welcome that, but they insist on limiting new affordable homes to a restricted product aimed at one particular part of the housing market. The second part of the amendment seeks to give local authorities the opportunity to make a case, given local need, to replace a social rented home with another social rented home—if a local authority decides not to make such a case, that is fine, but if it wants to go for a different mix of affordable housing options, it can. The amendment would provide authorities with greater flexibility and expand opportunities for affordable housing. I had hoped that the Government would welcome that, but they insist on limiting new affordable homes to a restricted product aimed at one particular part of the housing market.
crisis. If we are serious about fixing the housing crisis and if the Government are serious about encouraging people on to the housing ladder, they must consider all forms of tenure.

1.30 pm

The Government were forced to make a string of concessions in the House of Lords and were defeated multiple times, showing the extent of the opposition to the Bill. It does nothing to fix the causes of the past six years of failure, sounds the death knell for social housing and will be a big let-down for people who are desperate for a home. While there are many things in the Bill with which we disagree, amendment 47E is an improvement and would put in the Bill the very thing that the Prime Minister confirmed is the Government’s intention to undertake housing needs assessments and have statutory housing duties. They are democratically accountable to their local communities, and we want one-for-one replacement before the proceeds from forced sales are spent on anything else.

The Government are once again rejecting sensible, pragmatic advice from the House of Lords. They are ideologically committed to a Bill that will make the housing crisis worse than it already is. I urge the Government to listen to the House of Lords in its further assertion and to accept the amendment it proposed.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Minister has complained about the behaviour of the noble Lords, but I am extremely grateful that they are standing up for people in housing need across the country. I only wish that the Government would listen to them and to the vast numbers of people, both in this House and outside the building, who are campaigning hard and loud for a decent housing settlement.

The Government’s refusal to accept the amendment has caused huge concern at local level. My constituency is facing a massive housing crisis, and another 10% rise in private sector rent is expected within a year. We desperately need more council homes, not fewer. It is vital that we get the replacement policy right in the Bill, or we risk seeing a reduction in genuinely affordable homes in the context of an already chronic social housing shortage. The Government have claimed that they are meeting their manifesto commitment to fund the replacement of council properties and to fund right to buy, but they are not. First, the money for replacement is not secure. Secondly, the offer of one-for-one replacement — two-for-one in London — is not the same as like-for-like replacement, which means the same tenure, the same affordable rent and the same area. The bottom line is that council housing assets should not be used to fund the right to buy for housing association tenants. In a housing crisis, we should not be adopting a top-down, blanket policy of forcing the sell-off of council assets.

The Chartered Institute of Housing concluded in its assessment of the policies that “funds raised by high-value area sales will not fully cover the cost of local authority (LA) replacements and the cost of discounts under an extended right to buy” and that funding the right to buy discounts “could be achieved only at the cost of not building the replacement LA units.”

In other words, under the Government’s proposals, one can only be achieved at the expense of the other. The Government’s intention is that local authorities fully fund the right to buy, yet Ministers have not released any figures to demonstrate that additional funding would not be needed from central Government. That has been raised time and again, both in this House and in the other place, yet we still do not know how the numbers will add up.

Rightly, much has been made of the Public Accounts Committee report on this subject. The Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), rightly said that “there are no costings or workings out. We are not talking about a ‘back of an envelope’ calculation — there is no envelope at all.”

The Government appear to be hedging their bets by not releasing an impact assessment and appear to have undertaken little or no consideration of how the proposal would be funded in practice. Lords amendment 47E has
called them out. Ministers have estimated that they will get £4.5 billion of receipts from the forced sale of council homes. Shelter has calculated that 23,500 vacant council properties will need to be sold each year to deliver that figure. That equates to nearly a third of all vacant council stock and will leave those who rely on social housing with an even more minuscule chance of ever getting the secure council home they need. If Ministers were ever serious about replacing the council stock that they seek to flog off, it is surely only reasonable for the Government to take the precaution of ensuring, in legislation, that the funding will be there for local authorities to do so.

That prompts the question as to why the Government are digging their heels in. Why are they refusing to accept an amendment that simply seeks to secure their own manifesto commitment in the Bill? I fear the answer is that the proposal amounts to a tearing-down of the bricks and mortar of the welfare state: social housing. By objecting to amendment 47E, the Government are allowing council housing assets to be plundered to fund an ill-conceived attack on social housing, thereby pulling the rug from under those who need it most. That is why I hope that this House will continue to oppose the Government and will support the amendment from the other place.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): It is most unfortunate that the Government are being so obstinate. They did the same over child refugees, but they gave way because of this House and the strength of feeling in the country as a whole, about which I am obviously pleased.

Interestingly, in all the years I have done this job, carrying out surgeries for nearly half a century, nobody has come to me to say that they wanted to be rehoused in the private sector, but plenty of private tenants have been dissatisfied with conditions and circumstances and have wanted to be rehoused by the local authority or the housing association, as the case is in my part of the world. If these people were in a position to buy, they would not be seeking social housing. The Government seem to forget, deliberately, the number of people in this country whose only hope of decent, adequate housing is if they can be rehoused by the local authority. Therefore, I regret all the more this obstinate attitude taken by the Government. I can assume only that it comes out of a bias towards the private sector, against social housing.

I have listened to what Labour colleagues who represent London constituencies have said. I do not, for one moment, suggest that the problem in Walsall is anywhere near the situation in these London boroughs, but enough people in my constituency have been waiting a considerable time to be rehoused. The reason for that is the acute shortage and long waiting list, and their only hope is to be rehoused, in due course, by the Walsall Housing Group. I hope that, even at this late hour, Ministers will understand the need for this Lords amendment to be accepted. As I said, it is regrettable that the Government have been so obstinate.

Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 47E.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I must inform the House that the motion relates exclusively to England. A double majority is therefore required.

The House having divided: Ayes 292, Noes 197.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England:

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Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 47E disagreed to.

Ordered, That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendment 47E:

That Andrew Griffiths, Brandon Lewis, Seema Kennedy, Grahame M Morris, Teresa Pearce and Julian Smith be members of the Committee;

That Brandon Lewis be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee;

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(Julian Smith.)

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

Armed Forces Bill: (Programme) (No.3)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Armed Forces Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 15 October 2015 (Armed Forces Bill (Programme)) and 16 December 2015 (Armed Forces Bill (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement at today's sitting.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(Kris Hopkins.)

Question agreed to.
### Armed Forces Bill

#### Consideration of Lords amendments

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** I must draw the House’s attention to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendments 1 and 2. If the House agrees them, Mr Speaker will ensure that the appropriate entry is made in the *Journal*.

#### Clause 10

**REVIEW OF SENTENCE FOLLOWING OFFER OF ASSISTANCE**

1.57 pm

**The Minister for the Armed Forces (Penny Mordaunt):** I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** With this it will be convenient to consider Lords amendment 2.

**Penny Mordaunt:** I intend to be brief, Madam Deputy Speaker, as this is not a contentious issue.

I hope you, Madam Deputy Speaker, will allow me briefly to update the House. Our team in the Invictus games so far has a medal total of 89, 55 of which were won on the first day of the competition. One of our chief cheerleaders is my hon. Friend the Minister for Defence Personnel and Veterans, who has taken through this Bill. I am afraid that the House will have to make do with me today.

I am pleased to welcome the Armed Forces Bill back to the House to consider amendments made in the other place. These two amendments deal with a matter raised by the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee in its 21st report—the regulation-making powers in new sections 304D(10) and 304E(9), which are inserted into the Armed Forces Act 2006 by clauses 10 and 11. The powers allow regulations to be made in relation to appeals against reviews of sentence.

Clauses 10 and 11 are part of the statutory framework that the Bill creates for offenders who co-operate with investigations and prosecutions. That framework closely follows the provision in the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005, which applies to the civilian criminal justice system. It includes provisions that allow a person to receive a reduced sentence in return for assisting or offering to assist an investigator or prosecutor. A decision of the court martial on such reviews may be appealed by the person who is sentenced or the director of service prosecutions. The Lords amendments make provision with respect to such appeals.

The Bill does not set out the detailed rules that will apply to the conduct of proceedings on such appeals. Instead, new sections 304D and 304E of the 2006 Act provide for those rules to be set out in regulations made by the Secretary of State. The rules will be based on existing rules in the Courts-Martial (Appeals) Act 1968 that govern the conduct of appeals from the court martial to the court martial appeal court or the Supreme Court.

Accordingly, the Bill confers powers on the Secretary of State to make regulations in relation to appeals against reviews of sentence that contain “provision corresponding to any provision in Parts 2 to 4 of the Court Martial Appeals Act 1968, with or without modifications.” That is provided for in new sections 304D(10) and 304E(9). Such regulations would be subject to the negative procedure.

The Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee was content with that. I subject to one point of concern. The Committee noted in its report that the 1968 Act includes some provisions that may be modified by the Lord Chancellor by regulations subject to the affirmative procedure. The relevant provisions in the 1968 Act are in sections 31A, 33, 33A, 46A and 47. They relate to the recovery of costs and expenses arising from appeal proceedings. The Committee’s concern is that the new regulation-making powers in new sections 304D(10) and 304E(9), which are subject to the negative procedure, could be used to make provision about the recovery of costs and expenses which, if made under the 1968 Act in relation to appeals covered by that Act, would have to be made by affirmative procedure regulations.

The Government therefore submitted amendments in the other place to clauses 10 and 11 to limit the powers in the sections of the Armed Forces Act 2006 under which regulations may be made about appeals. The effect of the amendments is twofold. First, regulations under those sections may not make provision corresponding to that by which the Lord Chancellor may include in regulations under the 1968 Act. Second, regulations under those sections may confer regulation-making powers corresponding to those in the 1968 Act, but only if the exercise of the powers conferred is subject to the affirmative procedure, like the powers of the Lord Chancellor. The amendments address the concerns of the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee.

Although I note that the amendments have been designated as engaging financial privilege, we do not expect any significant Government expenditure to arise from the use of the regulation-making powers. I therefore hope that hon. Members will support the amendments, which were accepted on all sides of the House of Lords without Division. I commend them to the House.

**Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): I thank the Minister for updating the House on the impressive medal haul for our Invictus games team: long may their successes continue.

Like the Minister, I do not intend to detain the House unduly, as there is considerable consensus in this area, but I want briefly to record our support for the Lords amendments to the Armed Forces Bill. It is always pleasing and reassuring when we reach consensus not only on both sides of this House, but with the other place, particularly when dealing with such important matters as the welfare of our armed forces personnel. The safety and security of our nation rely on the commitment, courage and patriotism of our armed forces personnel. We owe them a considerable debt of gratitude. It is only right that we continue to update the law to ensure that we protect their safety, security and well-being, as we look to them to protect our own.
We are therefore pleased to support Lords amendments 1 and 2. The amendments are technical in nature and will limit the regulation-making powers in new sections 304D and 304E of the 2006 Act in respect of the recognition of assistance by courts martial in sentencing, which the Minister went into in a little more detail.

We welcome the commitments that the Government made on Report to publish data relating to sexual assault in the armed forces in a clear format; conduct an independent review into the implications of, and potential benefits of, the removal of commanding officer discretion to investigate sexual assault; and review the compensation levels paid to injured service personnel, particularly the most seriously injured and those who suffer mental ill health. Although the Opposition originally called for those measures to be included in the Bill, we are very pleased that the Government are prepared to make the concessions outside the statutory framework. I commend my colleagues in the other place, particularly the noble Lords Touhig and Tunnicliffe, for continuing to push for those concessions.

We are therefore pleased to support the Lords amendments.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her speech today on the conclusion of our consideration of the Bill. I thank her for the leadership she has provided and thank all those who have supported the Bill. We very much appreciate the House’s commitment and dedication to our soldiers, sailors and airmen.

I will make one quick point and do not intend to delay the House. It is gratifying to see that the centrality of the role of the commanding officer is still recognised in the Bill. That they are being offered assistance and legal clarification through the Lords amendments should be welcomed by everyone in this House. However, we must never lose sight of the fact the relationship between soldiers, sailors and airmen and their commanding officers must remain sacrosanct and must not be eroded by litigious shifts towards independent judicial oversight. I appreciate that the Minister has included that in her amendments.

We must continue to trust the men and women who are in command of their units in peacetime and on operations. That lies at the heart of the bond between them and the service personnel under their command, whether aboard their ships, in their regiments or on their air stations. We tinker with that at our peril. I thank the Minister for her commitment.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I join the Minister in congratulating those who are participating in the Invictus games.

The SNP has a strong focus on supporting the work of the service personnel who make up our armed forces. We have made constructive and positive progress in Committee and in the Chamber. It is important that we use every available opportunity to examine and assess both the structures and the outcomes for members of our armed services.

We were pleased about the Government’s concession in the other place last month, when they agreed to a review to consider removing the discretion of the commanding officer to investigate allegations of sexual assault. The accused and the accused would both benefit from any added transparency in such challenging situations.

The SNP supports Lords amendment 1. There was significant discussion in Committee about the most appropriate way to modernise the mechanics that lie behind the matters that are dealt with in clause 10, namely the review of a sentence following an offer of assistance. A person who has been sentenced by court martial may have their sentence reviewed to take account of assistance they have given or offered. The reviewing court may reduce the sentence in return for the offer of assistance. Additionally, subsection (8) allows a person whose sentence is reviewed to appeal against a court martial decision. The director of service prosecutions may also appeal against the decision. It is appropriate that fairness, transparency and good practice are central to service discipline proposals. Clause 10 appears to be a positive move in that regard.

In addition, we support Lords amendment 2, which relates to the provision that allows a sentence to be reviewed to take account of the failure by a person who has been sentenced to give the assistance that they had offered to an investigator or prosecutor in return for an offer of assistance. It is a positive move in that regard.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to, with Commons financial privileges waived.

Lords amendment 2 agreed to, with Commons financial privileges waived.

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at today’s sitting, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any message from the Lords has been received and any Committee to draw up Reasons which has been appointed at that sitting has reported.—(Dr Thérèse Coffey.)
Backbench Business

Pensions Uprating (UK Pensioners Living Overseas)

2.10 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern that the pensions of 550,000 UK pensioners residing in a number of overseas countries will no longer be uprated; is further concerned that this unfairness will lead to hardship for overseas pensioners and that this measure will encourage many UK citizens living in the UK from returning to their country of origin as many wish to do in their retirement; regrets that the Government has taken this action which will lead to loneliness and anger among UK pensioners living abroad; and calls on the Government to withdraw this measure and pay UK pensioners at home and abroad their due state pension with the same uprating adjustment in the interests of fairness and equity.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate.

I tabled early-day motion 1235 praying that the uprating legislation provided for the additional state pension to be uprated at least in line with earnings. Thus pensioners who up to this date have been entitled to upratings if they retired in the UK are no longer entitled to that increased payment simply because they live in certain overseas countries. Pensions will be uprated only in a European Union country or one with which the UK has a reciprocal agreement. There are 16 such non-European Union countries, including the USA, Israel, Turkey and the republics of the former Yugoslavia. The agreements with Canada and New Zealand and the former agreement with Australia do not provide for uprating. Between them those three countries account for around 80% of overseas residents who do not get their full pension entitlement.

We are talking about individuals who have paid national insurance in anticipation of receiving a full UK state pension. We often talk about a postcode lottery; in this case it is a national lottery, with 550,000 pensioners paying the price—entitlement to a full pension based not on their national insurance contributions, but on the country they live in. How can that be fair? If they live in the US Virgin Islands, their pension rights are protected, but if they live in the British Virgin Islands, those rights are not protected. The debate today is about fairness. It should not be about where pensioners live.

Pensions, after all, are a contract. They are not a benefit. It is only fair and just that a British pensioner who chooses to enjoy their retirement overseas should receive the same amount as a British pensioner who chooses to remain in the United Kingdom. Either they have an entitlement or they do not.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): If people pay in, the pension should pay out, regardless of their address.

Ian Blackford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that very succinct comment. That is exactly the point. This should be about what are often called British values of fairness. If people have paid into a pension, they should get their entitlement with the annual uprating. There is no excuse for us not to do that. Why do we seem to have different classes of pensioners? It is morally unjust and truly unfair for the Government to strip pensioners of their right to equal state provision. Overseas pensioners are entitled to fairness. The state pension is a right, not a privilege.

I look forward to the Minister responding later in the debate, but I hope that we do not hear what we have heard before—that it is all about cost. It is about doing the right thing and recognising that all pensioners deserve to be treated fairly. We should focus today on the 550,000 pensioners who are losing out, but there is a topical dimension to this debate as well. What are the implications for the 400,000 UK pensioners living in EU countries if there is a Brexit vote in a few weeks’ time? In the other place, Baroness Altmann, responding on 3 March to a parliamentary question of 23 February, stated:

“Of course there is uncertainty about how a vote to leave the EU could impact on access to pensioner benefits for UK pensioners living in other parts of Europe.”

What are we to make of that? There is no clarity at all in that answer from the Government. Are the 550,000 pensioners with frozen pensions likely to be joined by others if there is a Brexit vote?

The Government could say today that irrespective of that vote, those living in EU countries will have their pensions protected. Will the Minister do that today? Will he assure our pensioners living in EU countries...
that their pension will not be affected by a Brexit vote? That is a simple request. It is easy for the Minister to respond appropriately and remove the uncertainty for UK pensioners living in Europe.

The Government want to lift the limit on the period that UK citizens living abroad can vote from 15 years to their entire lifetime. Why would the Government want to confer voting rights on UK pensioners, but deny them full pension rights? What drives the decision-making process of this Government? Is it cost savings, or will they accept our obligations to meet our commitment to paying pensions, regardless of country of residence? I appreciate that the Minister will no doubt have been told by the Treasury to offer nothing. The Minister is a loyal Government servant and I understand his position, but let me help him to strengthen his case with the Treasury.

The present Chancellor of the Exchequer, during a debate on the Pensions Bill in the 2003-04 Session, when shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, said:

“If the system worked in the way that most people think, it would not matter where a person lived” —[Official Report, Pensions Public Bill Committee, 18 March 2004, c. 256—]

I have not said this before, but on this occasion I agree with the Chancellor: it should not matter where a person lives.

I appeal to the Minister to reflect on those words from his colleague, the present Chancellor. He spoke those words while in opposition, but each and every one of us should be judged by our deeds in government. It is not good enough to say the right thing when in opposition, and then, when in government, claim that it is all about cost. Let us today do the right thing. Let us unite in the House, standing up for all our pensioners, regardless of domicile.

I look forward to hearing voices from all sides of the Chamber. I look forward to hearing the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) speaking from the Labour Front Bench. She said at a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on frozen pensions on 2 February this year, “The situation is unfair, illogical and doesn’t make sense.” I agree with those sentiments.

If the House divides on the motion, I hope Members on both sides of the Chamber will stand shoulder to shoulder with all the pensioners who are seeking their full pension rights.

Patrick Grady: My hon. Friend mentioned the all-party group on frozen British pensions. He and the Chamber might be interested to know that he has just been elected as a vice-chair of the all-party group on women against state pension inequality and that my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) has been elected as co-chair—the meeting at which that happened was absolutely crowded. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that these injustices on pensions issues seem to run like a thread throughout UK Government policy? It really is time to resolve the WASPI issue and the overseas pensioners issue.

Ian Blackford: I thank my hon. Friend for that news—I did not even know that I was up for election. He is absolutely right: we are talking today about frozen pensions, but women born in the 1950s also face injustices. Many of us on both sides of the Chamber have engaged in the debate about that, and the fight goes on. Given the importance of these issues, I have suggested to the Minister that we should take some of them out of the Chamber and have a pensions commission that can look holistically at them. We can then make sure that we get them right and accept the obligations we all have to look after our pensioners, whether that is the women born in the 1950s or the frozen pensioners who are suffering.

I acknowledge that there is a cost to the Government in unfreezing pensions, but the resulting increased migration would offer them savings to help pay for doing that. In 2010, an Oxford Economics study using Government statistics showed that a pensioner who permanently leaves the UK saves the UK £7,700 a year in NHS usage and other age-related benefits, while the lost income in relation to such a pensioner would amount to £3,900—a net saving to the Exchequer of £3,800 at 2010 prices or £4,300 at today’s prices.

Many people living in the UK today perhaps came from the Caribbean or the Indian subcontinent and worked here all their lives, but those who want to go back to their country of origin cannot do so, because they risk being penalised by a frozen pension. We must help those who want to do that, as well as UK pensioners who live overseas. This is, therefore, not just about the gross cost of increased pension spending: there is an element of potentially reduced commitments to pensioners who seek to leave the UK to be with loved ones abroad or to return to their country of origin.

Those subject to frozen pensions have waited long enough to see this matter debated in the House. We must not let them down. We need to speak up for those pensioners living in the UK who want to move abroad to be with loved ones who have emigrated and those who came to work here and who wish to return to their country of origin, but who are fearful of the impact. There is a host of reasons why a pensioner may choose to move abroad in later life; it is simply wrong to punish them for making such a choice.

Pensioners who have paid the required national insurance contributions during their working lives, in the expectation of a decent basic pension in retirement, will find themselves living on incomes that fall in real terms year on year. Paying national insurance contributions to qualify for a state pension is mandatory. All recipients of the British state pension have made these contributions, and it is clearly unfair to differentiate payment levels.

Pensioners will now face ending their days in poverty because they chose to live in the “wrong” country—in most cases with no knowledge of the implications of their choice for their pension. Some people are being forced back to the UK—away from the family they love—just to secure an income they can survive on.

Reform would bring the UK in line with international norms, as most other developed countries now pay their state pension equivalents in the way I propose. We are, I am sad to say, the only country in the OECD that does not pay pensions irrespective of domicile. That should shame us all. Why are we the only country that does not accept our moral responsibility to our pensioners? That must change.

We know the statistics—that 550,000 people are affected—but behind those numbers are 550,000 human stories. Let me take three examples of the human cost
of freezing state pensions. Abhik Bonnerjee, now 73, moved from India to Glasgow in 1960. He worked in the UK for 38 years—in shipbuilding, steel manufacture and the food industry. He also owned a restaurant for six years.

Abhik returned to India in 1997 and reached the state pension age in 2008, when it was paid at £87.30 a week. He made all the required national insurance contributions, and if he was still in the UK today, he would be getting not £87 but the full UK state pension. The decline in his real-terms income has left Abhik concerned about losing his home. He now feels he may have to move back to the UK. Why are we putting such a gentleman in such a position?

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My hon. Friend gives a very good personal example. Is there not also a paradox? Abhik faces the dilemma of returning to the UK, but if he does return, not only will his pension be uprated to the full amount, but he will be able to access health and social care, so, as well as the disruption to this person’s life, there would also be a further cost to the UK Government.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. This is not just about someone who comes back to the UK to live. Oddly enough, if such individuals came back to the UK for a holiday, they would collect their full UK state pension when they were here. The whole thing is just daft; we need to normalise it and accept our full responsibilities.

Let me give the example of Rita Young. She is 78 and lives in Peterborough, in the UK. She retired in 2002, aged 67, having enjoyed a long career in market research and as a community volunteer. Rita’s son moved to work in Australia some time ago and now has a family there. Since being widowed, Rita has wanted to join her son and grandchildren, but she has felt unable to do so because of the prospect of a frozen pension.

As Rita gets older, she finds daily life increasingly difficult, especially as she does not have a family around her to rely on. She is deeply saddened that she is not able to be with her family during the later stages of her life. She said:

“It have worked and contributed to my state pension all my life. It doesn’t seem fair that the government can just stop uprating it because I want to be with my family.”

That is the human cost of frozen pensions.

Lastly, there is former college lecturer Anne Puckridge, now 91. She lived and worked in the UK all her working life, paying mandatory national insurance contributions throughout. In 2002, aged 77, she finally retired and decided to move to Canada to be with her daughter and grandchildren, who had moved to Calgary. Fourteen years on, Anne, who served as an intelligence officer in the Women’s Royal Naval Service in the second world war, is struggling to live on a frozen pension of £75.50 a week.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the fact that the majority of Commonwealth nations are part of this process where pensions are frozen is a slap in the face for those who served not only this country but the Commonwealth in the second world war and in conflicts after that?

In this year, when we have so many commemorations, unfreezing pensions would be a worthwhile exercise and would show that we value the worth of these people.

Ian Blackford: Absolutely. We owe a debt of gratitude to these people, and we should recognise that. My hon. Friend talks about the Commonwealth, and the arrangements are not reciprocal, because a Canadian pensioner who moved here would get their full pension. We need to make sure that our pensioners living in Canada are treated in the same way.

Anne feels that she will be forced to move back to the United Kingdom because her pension will no longer cover her day-to-day expenses, and she is increasingly reliant on her daughter to get by. She said:

“It’s the small things, and the injustice, that is really getting to me. I value my independence, but I can’t go on living on the breadline and I don’t want to inflict this on my family. As well as ever-increasing poverty, I feel a sense of stress and shame, which is affecting my health.”

For Abhik, Rita, Anne and all those who are not getting what is rightfully theirs, let this House today send a clear and unequivocal message to the Government that we want all our pensioners, regardless of domicile, to receive what is rightfully theirs: a full state pension. Today we can take the first steps towards fixing this injustice and delivering fairness for all our pensioners.
Mr Vara: I am grateful to both hon. Members for clarifying that point. I was simply pointing out an inconsistency on the Order Paper. For the sake of good order, I wanted to make clear that although yearly decisions have been taken by the Government, they are consistent with the policy undertaken by successive Governments from both sides of the House.

The UK state pension is exportable worldwide, regardless of recipients’ countries of residence or nationality. Successive Governments have taken the view that all those who have worked in the UK and built up an entitlement to state pension should be able to receive it. We have no plans to change this arrangement. However, the state pension is only increased, or uprated, each year where the recipient is resident in the European Economic Area or a country with which the UK has a reciprocal agreement that allows for uprating.

The policy on this issue has been consistent for 70 years, including under the Governments of Attlee, Wilson, Blair, Macmillan, Thatcher and Major. To uprate all state pension payments, regardless of a recipient’s country of residence, to the rate currently paid in the UK would cost in excess of an extra half a billion pounds a year. This amount would increase significantly over time. If arrears were to be included, the cost would be in the billions of pounds. Some have suggested partial uprating, but while this may cost tens of millions of pounds in the short term, the annual cost of the policy would converge to that of full uprating in the long term.

Sir Peter Bottomley: It might help if the Minister, either today or in the next Session, could tell us the last time the Government voluntarily negotiated a reciprocal agreement with another nation or territory. Secondly, since the last negotiation on a voluntary reciprocal agreement, how many other countries have been brought into the uprating for other reasons, such as accession to the EU?

Mr Vara: I can certainly partly address my hon. Friend’s question. No new commitments allowing for uprating have been made since the 1980s. As far as the other information he seeks, I am more than happy to write to him.

We have to recognise that resources are limited. The Government have to make judgments and take difficult decisions about how best to use limited resources. The majority of pensioners abroad live in countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa. The rules in those countries vary. Some have largely means-tested pension systems, whereby a significant proportion of any increase in the amount of the UK state pension would go to the Treasuries of those countries, rather than the pensioner. I should add that many people who voluntarily move abroad do so before they have reached pensionable age. As such, many of them may well have been able to build up some pension provision in the countries they have emigrated to.

We should remember that the decision to move abroad is a voluntary one. It remains a personal choice dependent on the circumstances of the individual, which will differ from person to person. The implications for their state pension is just one factor in that decision. There is no evidence of a proven behavioural link between the uprating policy for the state pension and pensioner migration.

Ian Blackford: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He is being very generous with his time. Will he not accept that every other OECD country allows their pensioners who have moved abroad to collect their pension? Why are we standing against this? We are not talking about people getting something they are not entitled to, whether they have moved abroad before they have retired. We are talking about them getting something they are entitled to because they have made national insurance contributions. That is what we are denying them.

Mr Vara: It is important that we do not just look at this from one narrow perspective. The hon. Gentleman says that people have paid national insurance and are therefore entitled to this. As I say, there are other aspects involved. For example, there is the element of individual choice. When people think about going abroad, it is not purely this issue that will determine whether they will live here or abroad.

Over the years, the UK has entered into a number of reciprocal agreements with other countries. Although most provide for payment of upratings, that is not the primary purpose of reciprocal social security agreements. They are intended mainly to provide a measure of co-ordination between social security schemes to protect the social security of workers moving between the two countries during their working lives. They prevent employees, their employers and the self-employed from needing to pay social security contributions to both the home state and the state of employment at the same time to get access to social security benefits. Of course, social security agreements vary to some extent from country to country, depending on the nature and scope of the other country’s social security scheme. It should also be noted that the UK is not alone in applying restrictions on payment of state pensions abroad. In some respects, the UK arrangements are less restrictive than those that apply in other countries.

The crux of the issue is individual choice. Those who have contributed to the UK state pension scheme are free to draw their entitlement from wherever they choose to live. The rules governing the uprating of pensions are straightforward and widely publicised. If a person chooses to live in country A their pension will be uprated, but if the choice is to live in country B their pension will not be uprated. In the final analysis, it is for the individual to weigh the benefits of living in country B, where her or his pension will not be uprated, against the benefits afforded by country A—or, indeed, remaining in the UK.

I am mindful that there are a number of hon. Members in the Chamber who wish to speak in the debate. It is a Backbench Business debate and I am mindful to give Back Benchers the freedom and opportunity to speak for a longer time than those on the Front Benches. So I congratulate again the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, and those who have supported him, on securing the debate. I am very pleased to have been able to set out the Government’s position, which remains unchanged.

2.38 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Members for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), and my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) on securing the debate. I thank all hon. Members taking part in it. They have already made some significant contributions.
My party leader has spoken eloquently on this issue in the past, having previously served on the all-party group. Frozen pensions seem even more of a problem today in the context of the rich and wealthy hiding their money in overseas tax havens. Many of my constituents have grandparents and parents who answered our Governments’ calls after the war to come to rebuild our country. Many of those pensioners have been long-standing public servants and have even fought for our country. They have paid national insurance for many, if not all, of their working lives and played by the rules.

Since 1981, however, it has been the position that where a person is not “ordinarily resident” in the UK there is no entitlement to an annual increase in retirement pension. The Government recently reaffirmed this in the debate on 26 January where the Minister stated:

“As hon. Members will be aware, the state pension is payable worldwide, but upratings for people who are not ordinarily resident in Great Britain are generally restricted to people living in the European economic area, Switzerland, Gibraltar or countries with which there is a reciprocal agreement that provides for uprating.”—[Official Report, Second Delegated Legislation Committee, 26 January 2016: c. 4]}

Cost has been cited as a determining factor in continuing to freeze pensions, and the House of Commons Library puts that in the region of £500 million a year. However, the proposal of partial uprating has an estimated up-front cost of just £37 million—small in Government spending terms—and this option offers an affordable and expeditious policy alternative. I and my party are keen to review the research by the International Consortium of British Pensioners and the National Pensioners Convention that suggests a partial way forward that is cost neutral to the Exchequer. We want to be bold in our response, and also credible. Indeed, I am aware that the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr Letwin) has made a commitment to look into this proposal on behalf of the Government.

As somebody relatively new to this brief, I believe it is worth taking a fresh look at the current arrangements, as the logic is just not there. Arrangements have been made with some countries and not others. While one British pensioner in the USA gets an uprated pension, a pensioner in neighbouring Canada has theirs frozen. The Government should review the impact of this policy. Labour is calling for a full equalities and impact assessment of the freeze in overseas state pensions, as well as a country-by-country analysis of the number of people affected. I recently met the ICBP and the NPC, and we discussed the impact of the freeze in overseas state pensions. Many Members have spoken passionately about the individual impacts, such as in the case of Rita Young being kept away from her family, mentioned by the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber.

The Government have told us half the story, but Ministers must be forthcoming about the impact of this policy. For example, the vast majority of those affected live in Canada or Australia, two countries where the pensions system is means-tested. The previous Pensions Minister said that, as a result, uprating the pensions of British citizens living in those countries would, in effect, mean a transfer to the Canadian and Australian exchequers, and the pensioners themselves would not necessarily be any better off. I would welcome further details from the Government about the number of British pensioners living in countries where the pensions system are not means-tested. I would be grateful if the Minister could give the House that information today or write to me. How many British pensioners live in countries where the pensions system is not means-tested, and by how much are they losing out? Echoes the recipient, made earlier, have the countries in which they live approached the UK Government for a reciprocal agreement similar to that which we have with the United States, and if so, on what grounds were those agreements refused? Overall, will the Minister give us an estimate of the cost to the Exchequer of uprating for British pensioners living in countries where the pensions system is not means-tested?

I am keen to listen, learn and work with stakeholders such as the all-party parliamentary group to find a solution that is credible, affordable and fair. Members across the House will, like me, have received emails and correspondence from many overseas pensioners who will be watching this debate. I hope they take from it the message that Members from across this House value the contribution that they have made to our great country and will continue to work across parties to seek a fair way forward.

2.44 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) on his good fortune in securing this debate. I also congratulate him on his election to office of the all-party WASPI group. Perhaps in that capacity he will be good enough to write to my constituents who expect me to be at its meeting today to explain why both he and I are here rather than upstairs.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on frozen British pensions, might be surprised that my name is not on the motion. The reason is merely that it is technically flawed, as my hon. Friend the Member and, I think, the hon. Gentleman recognised. However, that should not be allowed to diminish in any way its thrust, which is very simple. For that reason, I do not want to detain the House for very long.

This is about an injustice that was perpetrated just post-war and has continued ever since under successive Governments. The point has been made, but let us make it again: it is absurd that a pensioner living in Canada on one side of the Niagara falls has a frozen pension, while a pensioner living in the United States, 500 yards or so away on the other side of the river, does not have a frozen pension. There is no equity, no sense and no logic in that whatsoever.

It has been said, slightly incorrectly, that a lot of these people have paid national insurance contributions and should therefore be getting their pensions. We all need to recognise that national insurance is not a funded pension scheme. Unlike a private pension scheme, which is fully funded, NI is not—it contributes to a number of benefits. Nevertheless, throughout their working lives, very many of these now-elderly people who are being shoddily treated have not only paid national insurance contributions but paid their taxes to the United Kingdom, served the United Kingdom, and, in some cases, served the United Kingdom in the armed forces. If, in retirement, having paid their dues all their working lives, they wish then to join friends or family in another country, why should they not be able to do so and take their pensions with them?
As we have heard, there is another restriction on movement. A significant number of Commonwealth immigrants who came to the United Kingdom in the 1950s and 1960s, became established here, worked here, regard themselves as British and have paid their dues all their working lives, would like now, in old age, to return to the Caribbean, for example, but feel that they are being prevented from doing so because they are afraid that their pensions will be frozen and they will not be able to afford to live in the country of their birth. I believe that is morally wrong.

Another downside to all this is that we are in danger of generating a cadre of pensioners who will be coming back to the United Kingdom, like the 90-year-old in Canada who may have to abandon his partner who has dementia and come back here because he cannot afford to live. If they do so, there will be a cost to our health services and our social services. That needs to be taken into account by the Department for Work and Pensions and the Treasury.

On expats living particularly in France and Spain but throughout the European Union, one potentially very serious issue has been touched on but skated over. If—I hope we do not—the United Kingdom votes to leave the European Union, there is no guarantee that those pensioners will continue to have their pensions uprated. Following the cessation of the winter fuel payment, on the slightly spurious grounds that Guadeloupe, Martinique and one or two other places are part of metropolitan France and that it is therefore appropriate to remove that benefit from those living there, a lot of these pensioners are not, as is popularly described, rich retirees living on yachts in the Mediterranean drinking gin; they are struggling. They will come home, because they will not have anywhere else to go. I suspect that the trickle of people doing so will turn into a torrent if we leave the European Union. It is no good the Brexit people saying we will negotiate unilateral agreements. With 27 countries? Okay, it may be mainly France and Spain, but we would also have to consider Italy, Greece and some of the other 26 member states dotted around the European Union. It is a very real issue that the DWP and the Treasury will have to face.

The all-party group recognises the very real difficulties involved in resolving a problem that has been allowed to build up over many years. With great respect to my hon. Friend the Minister, it is facile to say that successive Governments have done this. Successive Governments have, but successive Governments have been wrong, and it is time we put the injustice right. There has to be a way of addressing the issue.

John Markham, Jim Tilley and others from the International Consortium of British Pensioners have met the Cabinet Office and proposed what I believe to be a sensible solution. I understand entirely that the Treasury is very afraid—this is not a DWP issue, really—that if an inch is given, a mile will be taken in the law courts by people who will seek recompense for the last 40 years. That, of course, could add up to a considerable amount of money. We have to move forward, however. We cannot honourably stay where we are, so John Markham and his colleagues, along with the all-party group, have suggested to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster that there should be an uprating based on receipt of today’s pensions. If somebody had their pension frozen 20 years ago when they left the United Kingdom, and many have, they would be uprated at that figure, not at today’s figure. That would be a pittance—a pitiful sum of money—but it would be a step in the right direction. Gradually, over time, it would resolve the problem and we would accept the principle that those pensions should be uprated in line with inflation year on year, which is the right principle.

Following receipt of John Markham’s paper, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has looked at it and construed that more information is needed. That I accept. The pensioners are not expert in all these matters, although they are pretty good. My understanding is that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has been in touch with John Markham and referred the matter back to him. He is now assembling the further information that is required to enable the Office for Budget Responsibility to consider the matter.

The DWP, the Treasury, the Cabinet Office and the Prime Minister all have to recognise this. If we do not address the problem, there will certainly be a moral cost, because we are wrong. There will also be a financial cost, on two fronts, because pensioners who cannot afford to live overseas will come home and pensioners who want to retire overseas will not go. At the end of the day, that will be a cost to the social services budget.

When my hon. Friend comes to respond, if he is granted the leave of the House to do so—I assume that he will be—I would like him simply to say that he recognises the problem, and that he understands that there has to be a way forward. There has to be a solution. I mean no disrespect to him, but I suspect that this is slightly above his pay grade; it is certainly above mine. I want this Conservative Government to have the pride and the courage to give people who are in retirement overseas the dignity that they deserve.

2.54 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I pay tribute to everyone who has brought this debate to the Chamber. I declare an interest: I am in receipt of a UK state pension, which has been uprated since I first received it. I further declare that it is possible that, at some time in the very distant future, I may decide to live abroad.

As you well know, Madam Deputy Speaker, "facts are chiels that winna ding And canna be disputed".

I have written that down for Hansard. I will repeat many things that have already been said in the debate, because they are important. A pension is not a benefit. It is not a privilege. It is not a handout. Pensions are earned by individuals who contribute to the state—generally those who have worked hard all their lives to provide for themselves and their families and to support our economy.

UK state pensions are uprated according to the laws and regulations in this country, and that right must be extended to all British pensioners abroad, over half a million of whom do not benefit from uprating. Currently, as has been said, no reciprocal agreement exists with the Commonwealth countries of Canada, New Zealand and Australia. UK pensioners living in these countries account for 80% of those who have had their pensions frozen. We have a close relationship with
those Commonwealth states, but apparently not close enough to form reciprocal agreements to support pensioners. The countries with which we have reciprocal agreements include the republics of the former Yugoslavia, the USA, Turkey and— a personal favourite of the Government—the tax havens of Barbados and Bermuda. The fact that the Government protect tax havens for the benefit of global elites but fail to right the injustice to their own pensioners perfectly exemplifies the Government’s priorities.

The reasons given by the Government for rejecting universal uprating lack coherence. The Government claim that the price of universal uprating is too high. In fact, Oxford University’s figures estimate that £4,300 is saved each year with every pensioner who moves abroad, because of the decreased pressure on public services. I am sure if they really looked, the Government could find the money to provide for those pensioners, just as they found the money for bombing Syria and just as they will find £167 billion to replace Trident. The Government are more concerned with bombing abroad than they are with supporting our pensioners abroad. The Government have said that they would like to focus on providing for pensioners who are based in the UK, but I reiterate that pensions are a right, and uprating for pensioners abroad should not mean a trade-off with pension rates for people here.

The Government have said that uprating is based on levels of earnings growth and price inflation in the UK, and that it has no relevance to pensioners abroad. However, no reciprocal agreements have been made with the three main foreign countries in which British pensioners live in order to try to overcome that deficit. The Government have said that opposition to universal uprating has been Government policy for 70 years across all Governments. As someone who supports the end of a 300-year political Union, I am not one for blind traditionalism.

This Government, like several before them, have refused even to consider universal uprating; they have refused to negotiate a reciprocal agreement with certain states, including Great Britain’s former dominions; and they have even refused to consider a review. That has all resulted in an asymmetrical system whereby pensioners in the EU and the USA benefit, but those in Australia and Canada, for example, do not.

The Government are taking “an out of sight, out of mind” approach, which leaves our pensioners who live overseas in some countries worse off each year, in real terms, through an incoherent system that sets us apart from every other member of the OECD. Partial uprating is a pragmatic and practical solution, and I urge the Government to take that route. It is about time the Government secured the rights to pension uprating for those who helped to build this country, rather than focusing on decreasing public spending and rolling back the state. When we work, we pay national insurance and our taxes, and our pensions are accrued on that basis. Those pensions are a right, and no one should ever be refused what is theirs by right, whether they live here or elsewhere.

2.59 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I am grateful for being called to speak in this debate. I operate on the principle that I have a contract with my Government and my Government have a contract with me: I work hard; I pay national insurance and I pay my tax, and in return I get a pension. That is a very simple expectation. It shames this Government and successive Governments that they have failed to meet their obligation to people who have chosen to move overseas. As I said in an intervention, where someone chooses to live should have no bearing on their pension entitlement, and it is shameful that Governments continue to argue otherwise.

The Minister said—it was a reasonable debating point—that uprating such pensions would cost £500 million a year, but people are owed that money and have a realistic expectation of receiving it. It is not as though a group of angry, silver-haired men and women were demanding some cash without having made any contribution. They deserve this cash precisely because they have made a contribution. Is my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) seeking to intervene? He has suddenly lurched forward in his seat.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I was just agreeing with my hon. Friend.

Mr Walker: Oh, that is excellent. It is always nice when someone agrees with me, particularly someone from my own side.

Now that the Minister has resumed his seat, I just want to say that he made great play in his speech of the issue of choice, in that pensioners have a choice about where they live. I am delighted that we have choices in this country—that is the wonderful thing about living in an open and free society—and that we can choose where we live and whom we associate with. However, choice cuts both ways, does it not? Choice also applies to Government. The Government absolutely have the choice to honour their promises to retired people who have made an enormous contribution to this country. Right now, the Government are choosing not to honour those commitments. I conclude this very short speech by saying that the Government should exercise their right to choose by actually choosing to do the right thing.

3.2 pm

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and the other Members who have spoken in this debate. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends because the fact that so many SNP Members are in the Chamber for this important debate sends out a very positive signal.

Some of us have been speaking about and supporting this campaign for many years. As has been said, parties of all political persuasions have made all the right noises and said positive things when in opposition, but have completely reneged on that when in government, because Governments always tend to renge when the Treasury gets involved. I very much welcome the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) because she reflected the views of the leader of our party, who has been committed to this for many years. I hope that we will now treat this campaign very seriously and be strong supporters of it.

I pay tribute to John Markham, who for many years has continued to push this issue with the International Consortium of British Pensioners, the global coalition...
of all the various campaign groups. He has kept going, as have all his supporters, when—time after time, setback after setback—they must have felt that they were not really getting anywhere. Following the speeches by Members on both sides of the Chamber, I hope they feel that they are now beginning to see movement. I also welcome the involvement and support of the National Pensioners Convention. All of us who have pensioners groups in our constituencies—this issue is certainly raised regularly in my area—know that pensioners in this country, no matter how difficult their circumstances, believe that the arrangement is unfair and would welcome the resolution of this problem.

I am particularly concerned about the issue because it involves many people from the Afro-Caribbean community in my area. They came to this country to work many years ago and many of them are now getting on and would like to go back. Some islands in the Caribbean are covered and some are not. It is just ludicrous that our Government cannot work out reciprocal agreements even with that small area of the Caribbean—let us forget the big countries for the moment. Those people want to go back home in their old age to retire, but do not feel they can go back knowing that their pension will not increase and that they may well need help from their families and relatives there, when they have been working over here. They want to go back home and to be able to retire with dignity.

To be honest, the Minister did not really say anything other than what he read out from his brief, which probably included everything he said the last time he spoke. I do not understand why we cannot get a reciprocal agreement with Australia, Canada and New Zealand. When he winds up, will he actually tell us why we cannot get such an agreement? Have the Government tried to do so? When did they last discuss it? What are the obstacles to it? Those three countries are among the countries closest to this country. They are part of the Commonwealth, and many of their citizens died for us during the first and second world wars. Why can we not get a reciprocal agreement with those three countries, and why can we not get one with the whole of the Caribbean?

Reciprocal agreements are only one way of solving this problem. The best way would obviously be to restore fairness by saying that this is the pensioners’ money, not the Government’s—the money is due to pensioners and should have gone to them. At some stage, a Government will have to accept that enough is enough and that we really must take this bold step. I hope that the suggestions made in this very good paper, “Frozen British Pensions: The Case for Change”, which has a lot in it, can be taken up. If we could at least have a partial uprating, that would be a start.

This is a question of justice and fairness, not of cost. We know that the cost for many of the people who would like to move abroad, go back home or retire to be with their family would be made up through savings over the years. There will be savings—there is no doubt about that—and it will also cost us much more if, as has been said, many people came back to this country just when they will need more support from the health service and all the other social services. On the cost issue, I understand that this sounds like a huge amount of money, but to me, £30 million—it would at least start to address the problem by following the suggestion in this document—is not a huge amount of money. I do not want to get involved in the EU thing, but I think we are giving something like £50 million a day to the European Union. In the scale of things, £30 million is actually a very small amount.

I appeal to the Minister and certainly to my hon. Friend on the Front Bench to keep up the pressure on this issue, particularly because I believe that a start has now been made. During the 27 years that I have been in the House, I have never seen so many Members involved in holding debates or asking questions on these matters. Two or three committed Conservative Members have always done a huge amount of work on it, but for the first time a lot of new Members have understood the issue. The system has not been explained to people. There are even people moving now who do not realise what it means, because the website is not clear; there is no clarity. Many people who moved a long time ago had no idea that their pension would not be uprated, so we have not made this very clear.

I thank all Members who have taken part in the debate today. I hope that those watching this debate all over the world, who have felt so let down over the years, will feel that at last—thanks to the efforts of the Members who have secured this debate and have spoken today—there is a chink of light and that this situation may actually begin to change.

3.9 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I agree with everything that has been said so far, except what has been said from the Front Bench. That is not to be taken personally by the Minister—we know that his role is to say what the Government have decided not to change.

The issue is that the Government have to change. We ought to start by changing the pension fund for Members of Parliament so that any Member of Parliament who goes to live in one of the countries on the frozen list does not get a pension at all or, if they do, it is not uprated in line with inflation. Why is it that the actuaries who do the calculations for the Government can take their second state pension—their work pension—abroad to any island in the Caribbean, and know that it will be uprated with inflation? Why is it that if they move to the Isle of Skye, the Isle of Wight, the Isle of Ely, or possibly even to Dubai—

Mr Charles Walker: The Isle of Thanet.

Sir Peter Bottomley: Indeed—I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I pay tribute to him, to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) and to others who, in advance of the welcome efforts from the Scottish National party, have followed the efforts of John Markham and his predecessors—he was not the first to fight this battle, although I hope he will be the last.

Why is it such an arbitrary collection of countries? I believe that a time will come when this Government find that a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting is dominated, justifiably, by representatives of the main countries, where the more than half a million pensioners with frozen pensions live, asking the head of our Government why it is that a Minister can sit on the Front Bench and say—these are not precisely the Minister’s
words—that we should not worry too much, because if the person really needs money they can get it from social security in the country they live in. That may be true in Australia, but it does not apply to the person who served in the civil service in Southern Rhodesia and stayed on in Zimbabwe, where we can now find billion dollar notes because of the previous inflation—

heaven knows what will come from the present situation. That person has no option. That is not fair or right.

The politics mean that this change will come in time. It is a question of when and how. I suspect at some stage in the future—I hope still to be in the House when it happens; I do not intend to go on forever but I intend to go on for quite some time—the full uprating will be applied retrospectively. I understand from John Markham’s team that the first, and possibly only, step will be a partial unfreezing.

We need the Chancellor to understand that, as and when we have the proper plans for the 1.2 million British pensioners overseas to be able to vote—whether in individual constituencies or in some overseas constituency as for France—that will bring in a political power that is missing at the moment. The problem at present is that those who are already overseas tend not to be registered and do not vote—it is a scandal how very few of those who have moved even in the past 15 years are registered to vote and do so—and those who have not yet reached pension age or have not yet gone abroad do not think that this situation really matters to them.

We have 1.2 million British pensioners overseas now, which is 10% of British pensioners. We have to anticipate that there will perhaps be twice as many in the future. The time for the Government to resolve this issue is now. Otherwise, every extra 100,000 British pensioners abroad will mean about 50,000 in a country where their pension will be frozen, and the Government will then start to say that the cost is going up.

The alternative, of course, is for the Government to say that they do not think that pensioners overseas should get an uprating to their state pension and that they will renegotiate the agreements they already have with the EU and other countries around the world so that none of the 1.2 million British overseas pensioners will get an increase. That would at least have some logic to it. Perhaps the Minister will say now—or else he could write to me later—whether the Government have asked any country with which we have a reciprocal agreement whether it would like to drop it. I doubt he will be able to confirm that, because I do not think it has happened. Over the past 35 years, since 1981, the Government have simply thought that they do not have to do much about the situation because people are not making a fuss about it. Well, the job of this House of Commons is to make a fuss about it.

I could go on for quite some time, but I will put it this way. I do not want my Government—this Government or any alternative Government—to go on giving to the Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions the sort of points in their brief that the Minister has been given today and so has given to us. The arguments—not the Minister—are weak and insubstantial. They do not take us any further forward or provide a resolution. They just say, “We’re going to be stick-in-the-mud, because in 1981 we got away with it and nobody noticed.”

More than half a million people, in countries that have mostly associated with this country, in war and peace, prosperity and difficulty, are being denied the increases that everyone else takes for granted, not just in this country but around the world.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for bringing the issue forward for debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee. I hope that the Minister will forgive me for the way in which I put some of my points, which are not personal in any way at all. I hope that he will report back that this House and this country do not believe in unfairness. Some of us think that we were elected to help the Government to start doing things that are right because they are right, and not just because popular pressure will grow to make them do those things, whether they think they are right or wrong. The reason to do this is that it is right. The time to do it is now. I hope that that message will go clearly through to the Government.

3.16 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for securing this debate.

It is fair to say that, given my youthfulness, prior to last year I did not have a great understanding of pensions. But the more I look into the different issues, the more bizarre the world of pensions seems to get. I thank the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) for mentioning the fact that we are not at the WASPI meeting because we are in this Chamber debating this issue. He made an interesting point, which is in fact one reason why I find this debate incredibly bizarre. He said that the Government claim to have received legal advice that raises fears that people will be able to claim for back payments. But legal advice received by the International Consortium of British Pensioners from Blackstone Chambers contradicts that.

The Minister said that many pensioners overseas whose pensions are frozen are compensated through means-tested benefits in their country of residence and implied that unfreezing those pensions would make savings for foreign Governments at the expense of the UK taxpayer. But again, when we look at the facts, the ICBP’s recent review of the countries with the largest numbers of British pensioners with frozen pensions shows that that is simply not the case. The vast majority of pensioners would benefit greatly from an uprating in full.

That brings me to the person who my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber mentioned, Anne Puckridge, the former college lecturer, who is now 91 years of age. She worked in the UK all her life, then moved to Canada to be with her daughter and grandchildren. Fourteen years on, Anne, who served as an intelligence officer in the Women’s Royal Naval Service during the second world war, is struggling to live on a frozen pension of £75.50, which is what she was entitled to when she moved. As my hon. Friend pointed out, she now fears that she will be forced to move back to Britain to be able to survive. He gave us some telling quotes. She has said:

“It’s the small things, and the injustice, that is really getting to me…I value my independence, but I can’t go on living on the breadline and I don’t want to inflict this on my family.”

That is telling. She is not asking for millions here—she does not want to raid the bank. She is asking for the
extra 20 or 30 quid that she is entitled to after she paid into the system all her working life. Anne went on to say—this is perhaps the part that gives us most insight: “As well as ever-increasingly poverty, I feel a sense of stress and shame, which is affecting my health.”

I looked through the various briefings on this issue and the previous debates there have been, for years now—as the Minister rightly pointed out, this debate has been going on since probably after world war two. In 1981, the line from the Government was not far off what the Minister said today. They said that they could not, unfortunately, unfreeze the pensions because that was incompatible with the Government’s policy of containing the long-term cost of the social security system to ensure that it remained affordable. This is an incredibly cynical point—I am getting used to those in here, so I thought I may as well join in—but it concerns the real lunacy of the argument about cost. Instead of giving people who have paid into the system all their life the £20 or £30 extra that people in the UK get and to which they are entitled, we are saying, “We’re not going to give you that money, but you can go and live abroad, make yourself ill through poverty, worry and the stress of having to come home. When you are forced to return to Britain, don’t worry, we’ll foot the bill for the NHS and everything else.” The argument about cost does not stand up—costs will increase when pensioners who have been made ill through stress or whatever, have to come back in order to survive.

Alan Brown: Yet again, my hon. Friend is making a powerful argument. Does not another nonsense argument about cost concern the reciprocal arrangement that is needed, given that Canadians in this country can get the full state pension from their country but British pensioners cannot get it in Canada? This is not about protecting social security in this country, because a reciprocal arrangement could easily be put in place. We are supposed to have the best social security system in the world, so the argument about cost is nonsense given that the Canadians can afford to pay for their citizens in this country.

Mhairi Black: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, and I will touch on our relationship with Canada in a minute. My argument is supported by a 2010 study by Oxford Economics, which used Government statistics to show that a pensioner who permanently leaves the UK saves it £4,300 a year in NHS usage and other social security benefits. We are placing an increasing workload and cost on to the NHS and other public bodies—the very bodies that we are simultaneously using as part of the argument to continue with frozen pensions. It makes no sense.

The third reason often given by the Government for this measure is that there could be some sort of legal or political backlash, but that is not the case. This issue has been debated for years, and Annette Carson made a legal challenge against the Government on the basis of discrimination. She said that because she was in South Africa, which does not have a reciprocal deal with the UK, her pension was frozen, whereas if she had moved to an EU country—or a country with such a deal—she would have had an uprated pension. The judge ruled that she lost the case and that there was no discrimination, but he noted just how ludicrous the system is, and how much confusion there is about it. He ruled that there was a political, rather than judicial, decision, which shows how crazy these plans are—the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) used that word previously.

Any pensioner who moves within the EU or the European economic area gets an increase, and the UK has reciprocal agreements with 16 countries. As the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) pointed out, our agreements with Canada, New Zealand and Australia do not allow for unfreezing, yet those three countries are home to 80% of overseas residents who do not receive upratings.

I agree with everything that the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) said about choice and how that has to work both ways with the Government. The Minister said that pensioners can choose whether to go to country A that has a deal, or country B that does not, but that does not add up. Surely true freedom would allow someone to choose freely where they want to go, knowing that they have paid in all their life and will now get that back. It is not for the Government to put a hindrance on where people can choose to spend the pension that they have built up over their lifetime.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The hon. Lady has not put forward this idea directly, so perhaps I should say it out loud. Perhaps if New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Canada and others applied to join the EU, people would get that uprating and we would solve the problem.

Mhairi Black: That is an interesting point, but we will wait and see how things go in the summer.

Everything that has been mentioned in this debate touches on a deeper, more fundamental problem within pensions as a whole under this and previous Governments—that of inconsistency. We tell people to pay national insurance for a pension and to save for a fulfilling, free and happy retirement—but only in certain places. We tell people that we will give them greater freedom, that they can be trusted with their pensions, and that we will give them greater choice and allow them to take their pensions early—but we will not give them the freedom to move anywhere with that pension. Deals are made to uprate pensions in some countries, but not others; people are given the vote in some countries, but the Government are not prepared to pay out for their pension. It does not make sense. Everything seems to be convoluted and conflicting.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber mentioned what the Chancellor said about being supportive of change when he was in opposition, but the House of Commons Library shows that the then shadow Pensions Minister explained that the Conservatives had “considerable sympathy” with those affected. The Prime Minister stated in a letter that the Government do not feel that they can change anything in times of austerity—“How can we unfreeze those pensions when people in the UK are being asked to make sacrifices?” However, in the wake of recent events—whether the saga of the Panama papers or the sham battle with Google—it is clear that the Government are asking the wrong people to make sacrifices, and it is worth reminding the Minister that all the sympathy in the world will not pay the bills.
Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Several Members have asked the Minister to speak again, so with leave of the House I call Mr Vara.

3.26 pm

Mr Vara: With leave of the House I would like to make some brief comments. I am mindful that this is a Backbench Business Committee debate, and that it is not normal for Front Benchers to have a second go. I do not want to set a precedent, so I will just make one or two concluding comments about issues that have been raised.

Bilateral agreements were mentioned, and those are normally negotiated on the basis of compatibility of systems. That reciprocity is achieved between the two nations, and respective costs are broadly balanced. Canada has more than 150,000 recipients of the UK state pension, but any new bilateral agreement would not achieve reciprocity and would be disadvantageous to the UK taxpayer.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) for all the work that he has done consistently over a number of years on this issue.

Sir Peter Bottomley rose—

Mr Vara: I will not take any interventions, but I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), and to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey).

Sir Peter Bottomley rose—

Mr Vara: I will not give way.

Sir Peter Bottomley: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker: The logic, I think, is that if a reciprocal agreement may be done at no cost, there would be no reciprocal agreements anywhere.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman knows that I cannot answer that because it is not a point of order. It is a point of debate, and the Minister is being brief because he has the leave of the House to speak again.

Mr Vara: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—I do not wish to abuse the leave of the House.

I simply conclude by referring to the issue raised by the International Consortium of British Pensioners, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet mentioned. He was right to say that it has come up with proposals, but it was felt that they were not sufficiently developed. The ICBP is working on more proposals and we look forward to having sight of them.

3.28 pm

Ian Blackford: We have had a great debate and there is unity on both sides of the Chamber that the situation shames us all. Members on both sides of the House want the Government to take action. As many have said, it is about fairness. I thank the Front Benchers who have spoken, my hon. Friends the Members for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), and the hon. Members for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) and for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley).

This is a matter of considerable importance. The hon. Member for North Thanet has led the all-party parliamentary group with support from many others, including the hon. Member for Worthing West. We will not let this go, because we have a duty to stand up for the John Markhams of this world and all the others who have been mentioned.

I purposely did not mention the partial uprating but other hon. Members did. The Government could make a start by acknowledging the partial uprating. I say this to the Minister: please go away and talk to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who spoke in 2003 about the injustices taking place at that time. The Government should accept the moral responsibility that we have for pensioners everywhere. To take the logic of the hon. Member for Worthing West, if we as Members of Parliament decided to go and live in the British Virgin Islands, we would get our pension. If it is right for us, it is right for everybody else. Let’s do the right thing.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House notes with concern that the pensions of 550,000 UK pensioners residing in a number of overseas countries will no longer be uprated; is further concerned that this unfairness will lead to hardship for overseas pensioners and that this measure will encourage many UK citizens living in the UK from returning to their country of origin as many wish to do in their retirement; regrets that the Government has taken this action which will lead to loneliness and anger among UK pensioners living abroad; and calls on the Government to withdraw this measure and pay UK pensioners at home and abroad their due state pension with the same uprating adjustment in the interests of fairness and equity.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I seek your urgent advice? I and others are very concerned about the plight of licensed black cab drivers in London, many of whom are my constituents—I believe many are your constituents. How can I bring my concerns best to the attention of the new Mayor of London?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I can honestly answer the hon. Gentleman by saying that that is sadly not a point of order for the Chair, but I wish it were a point of order for the Chair because I share his concerns. I no longer speak in this place on behalf of my constituents, but that does not mean that I do not work on their behalf. He and I share a very great concern about the point he has just made. I hope he will find a way, as other colleagues will, of asking questions or applying for debates in this place that will come to the attention of the new Mayor of London, whom we all hope will take the necessary action on this extremely important matter.

I have to announce to the House that I must correct the number announced in the Division earlier today on the motion to disagree to the Lords message on the Housing and Planning Bill. The number of Members voting no and representing English constituencies was erroneously reported as 177 instead of 166. The correct
figures are as follows: the Ayes were 292 and the Noes were 197; and of those Members representing constituencies in England, the Ayes were 275 and the Noes were 166. The House will have noted that, although there was an error in the numbers, it makes no difference to the result of the Division.

Under the order of the House of earlier today, I shall not adjourn the House until any message from the Lords has been received. I will suspend the sitting to await a message from the Lords. When the House is ready to resume, the bells will be sounded and a warning notice will be put on the annunciator in the usual way.

3.33 pm
Sitting suspended (Order, 11 May).

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I am absolutely delighted that I have been successful in securing this Adjournment debate. I am even more delighted that technically I have until 7 o’clock to speak on train services in Southend—although I saw that on PoliticsHome it was billed as “Train Services in Scotland” so I think people there got slightly confused.

I want to apologise for my voice, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is the result of hayfever, which I was told that I would grow out of 60 years ago, but much more importantly it is the result of attending a football match last night. I was honoured to attend the last match of West Ham United at Upton Park, together with my hon. Friends the Members for Hornchurch and Upminster (Dame Angela Watkinson), for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), and for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke). All I can say is that I have been blowing bubbles ever since—it was a wonderful occasion. My hon. Friend the Minister will be interested to know that the behaviour of West Ham supporters on the c2c train last night was absolutely exemplary. As she knows, I have one or two criticisms about what has happened on other occasions, but last night it was definitely the happy c2c line.

I am also delighted to share with the House the fact that it looks likely that we have a Conservative-controlled council in Southend again—a minority Conservative council with 24 councillors. I know that the House will want to send congratulations to first-time councillor David Burzotta, who is a wonderful tenor, and to David Garston and Mrs Helen Boyd, who won Prittlewell and Blenheim Park wards. Alex Bright, a member of staff of my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House, was also successfully elected to the council. I mention this because three weeks ago, on 21 April, Councillor James Courtenay tabled a motion in the council about the c2c service that made a number of observations about it. His motion was accepted unopposed.

Last month, my hon. Friend the Minister and I had a meeting about train services in Southend, and we had an exchange of views. This debate gives me an opportunity to reflect on the situation since she and I had that meeting. Because the debate has come on early, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) have not been able to join me just yet, but although they are not physically here, they are here in spirit. They have both shared with me a number of observations on train services in Southend.

I know that my hon. Friend the Minister, who is a robust politician—I celebrate that fact—will not take offence at anything that I am now going to say. I will probably sound like Victor Meldrew. I am delighted to say that my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East has hot-footed it from the Foreign Office and now joined us in the debate. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford will be on his way in due course.

When I was first elected in 1983 as a Member of Parliament for the then constituency of Basildon—this does sound like Victor Meldrew—Ministers had huge
power, but I feel as though, for whatever reason, their power is not what it was. I do not blame my hon. Friend the Minister for the repercussions of the timetable changes on Southend services. As a newly elected Member of Parliament all those years ago, I stopped the closure of an A&E unit with two days to go, for example, and I prevented three schools from being closed. My noble Friend Lord Patten and I were able to do something about re-siting a young offenders unit. We were able to do all sorts of things. All these years later, I feel as though my power as a Member of Parliament is greatly diminished.

As we all know, when Tony Blair became Prime Minister in 1997—the number of Conservative Members of Parliament was reduced to 165, and then to 164 following a by-election—much power was given away to unelected quangos. My hon. Friend the Minister would be right to reflect on the fact that, because of privatisation, Ministers have much less control over such matters than they once did.

I have, for more years than I care to remember, been a commuter on trains to London. I was born in London, which is why I am a lifelong Hammers fan. I regularly used to commute on the Greater Anglia line, and I shared with fellow passengers the nightmare of being unable to get on to crowded trains, and worrying about being late for work and being told off by the boss. In those days, we did not have flexi-hours, and we used to worry about how on earth we would be able to get into the overcrowded carriages. My hon. Friend the Minister will be pleased to know that the trains eventually improved, and London Liverpool Street station was redeveloped. It is now an iconic building. That gave great comfort to all the commuters.

In the constituency that I now represent, only one station, Prittlewell, is served by that line. The station was included in the constituency six years ago. The trains that service the line are completely clapped out, the fares are far too high and the service is pretty poor in every respect. The present operators—I have to be fair to them—accompanied me on a public journey to Liverpool Street. The managing director, Jamie Burles, who is fairly new, was up for going on that public journey with me. In those days, this place was regularly covered and I succeeded in having a public row with him live on television in one of the clapped-out carriages. That night—we used to sit into the wee hours of the morning—I was clapped through the Division Lobby by my colleagues, who thought that I was right to express myself, on behalf of my constituents, about how awful the service was.

I turn to the c2c service, and in particular to trains that stop at the three stations in the area that I represent: Leigh-on-Sea, Chalkwell and Westcliff-on-Sea. Before I do, I want to pay tribute to my predecessor, the late Lord Kelvedon, a former Secretary of State for Transport. He got a bad press for all sorts of reasons, but I have a well-earned reputation as the misery line. The rolling stock was awful, the trains kept breaking down due to points failure and the passengers had regularly had to walk down the line from Horndon-on-the-Hill.

The rest is history. It was down to the fact that the then chairman of British Rail agreed to go on a public journey with me. In those days, this place was regularly covered and I succeeded in having a public row with him live on television in one of the clapped-out carriages. That night—we used to sit into the wee hours of the morning—I was clapped through the Division Lobby by my colleagues, who thought that I was right to express myself, on behalf of my constituents, about how awful the service was.

The line was privatised, and in 1996 it was awarded to Prism Rail, which operated as LTS Rail. Relatively late on, LTS Rail was rebranded as c2c, which was sold to National Express in July 2000, and the line was transformed into the happy line. That was not the result of gas, but of the fact that everyone was very pleased when they got on the train—it arrived at the station a bit like the bullet train does in Japan—and very happy with the travelling experience. When I became the Member for Parliament for Southend West, I found that customer satisfaction had been transformed. I enjoyed a good relationship with the operators and became their greatest cheerleader.

All that changed, however, on 13 December 2015. The managing director told me about the new timetable changes. I had not asked for any timetable changes, and I had not had any letters, emails or phone calls complaining about the service, but he contacted me to say that the timetable changes would mean an improved passenger experience. I told him that I was already having a very nice experience, but if he could make that even better, so be it. He said there would be increased reliability—I thought the trains were very reliable—and that there would be quicker commutes and more seat availability.
[Sir David Amess]

He told me that, in any case, if things did not work out, it was more likely than not that things would be returned to the way they were before.

I did not give the matter a second thought. I looked forward to Christmas and, far from being alarmed, I was absolutely delighted. It was now a Rolls-Royce service, in which one was transported to Fenchurch Street practically in sedan chairs. However, within days of the changes, I received dozens of emails from constituents complaining about how difficult their journeys to and from London had become as a result of the new timetable. At that time, I did not quite understand what they were talking about.

I then began to receive a large amount of correspondence, on a daily basis, about how dreadful the c2c line had become, with many people stating that they feared the misery line had returned. I found that incredibly frustrating, as I had put in so much hard work to fix the problem all those years ago. At that point I knew that it was absolutely essential that my constituents’ voices were heard. They claimed that their concerns were being overlooked—the managing director was apparently not taking much notice of them and had not made any public journeys at peak times to see the situation for himself.

I do not have a team of people to deal with the sort of absolute torrent that I faced at the time. As we all know, as power has seeped away from this place, politicians now often seem to exist simply to be blamed for things; as the Member for Southend West, I found myself being blamed for the impact of the timetable changes. Now, I have never been a trainspotter or an expert in timetable changes, so I did not quite understand exactly what was going on. But I was left to fend for myself with all these constituents’ problems.

It is no wonder that so many of them are still so displeased with the new timetable, when we look at the precise changes that have had an impact on the three stations serving my constituency. Trains servicing the stations in my constituency at peak travelling times now have fewer carriages, and almost all of them stop at every London station on the line. That is absolutely ridiculous, especially when we take into account the fact that c2c has reportedly recorded a 19% increase in evening peak travel and a 15% increase in traffic in the past three years.

It is clear why the commute has become a very unpleasant experience for my constituents. They tell me that at peak time they now face overcrowding. The trains are full before they depart from Fenchurch Street, yet there is the prospect of more passengers attempting to board at Limehouse, West Ham and Barking. I have been contacted about a number of issues caused by that overcrowding. It is important that I highlight the most serious problems that my constituents face.

I have been inundated with emails. I will not name the constituents—I will call them X. One says that he has given up emailing the MD of c2c “as he seems to be fond only of providing glib comments or poor statistics... The May revisions”—that is, the ones happening this month—“do nothing to help the people to the east of Leigh-on-Sea... Even with the revised timetable I still lose 24 minutes a day... compared to my previous journeys, I am certainly no better off, and would argue nobody east of Leigh-on-Sea benefits at all from the May revisions. The railway is being run for the benefit of those in the Barking/West Ham areas... I am not convinced the new trains promised for later this year will materialise”.

The next says:

“The timetable is now a total mess... No ‘clock-face’ pattern or consistency.

‘Flagship’ trains like Leigh starters in the morning and the 16.58 down are withdrawn or wrecked by additional stops. Promises to local commuters broken.”

The next says:

“Paying in excess of £3,000 per annum for this privilege I fail to see how and why the service was changed, and after writing numerous emails to c2c complaining about the timetable changes, I have received no satisfactory response. Their last email to me advised me to contact the Ombudsman.

How could they not see the damage they would do by changing a timetable which, in my view, worked perfectly, and served commuters down the line more than adequately. Extra stops and fewer carriages, packed trains, no guards, the list is endless... The new timetable has returned us to the days of the Misery Line.”

The next one asks why c2c is discriminating against commuters from Chalkwell to Shoebury:

“Why don’t we have any fast trains in the morning between 6-7am”—well, I do not know—“why are they stopping every station? The overcrowding is horrendous—daily—why? Because they stop everywhere!... How can they justify journey time increase from 45 mins to almost an hour?... Why are c2c favouring East London?”

It goes on and on.

One commuter stated:

“I have used this line since 1964 and commuted between the early 1980s and 2007. Until the new timetable, I have never had any issue with c2c’s service.”

He pointed out some of the problems:

“18:00-19:00 capacity to Leigh reduced by 39%... 7x 8-car trains having Leigh station calls removed between 17:00-19:00... Unacceptable tiny 4-car ‘off peak Tilbury loop’ size trains on the main line evening peak”.

I do not mean this as an argument against the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price). The same commuter continued:

“The Leigh service is now further reduced to just 44 carriages (the 18.04 increased to 12-cars from 8, but 18.13 reduced to 4-car from 8, 18.58 8-car withdrawn with 4-car 18.49 added).”

As you see, Madam Deputy Speaker, my constituents go into fine detail about this, although I am not an expert in any of it.

Another constituent stated:

“Commuters from Leigh-on-Sea are not able reliably to jump on a train in the evening... Previously, semi-fast trains used to take 38 minutes whereas now the fastest train to Leigh-on-Sea is 46 minutes. c2c continue to run four coaches... c2c is running the new Metro trains down the line”, which is having disastrous effects. In reply, c2c said:

“a good timetable is about the operator keeping up with its reputation of good performance. From Day One we will be maintaining the sentiments in this statement”.

As my constituent said, however:

“I am afraid that the recent timetables changes have failed to maintain the sentiments in this statement”.

Another constituent said:

“Although I understand that the Minister for railways has agreed to waive the contractual obligation for more trains to stop at London connecting stations, c2c services continue to stop at more stations and it is us long distance commuters who suffer as we experience crowded trains”.
She mentioned the contract to purchase more rolling stock, and said that yet again c2c is “looking after the ‘local’ travellers and not the Southend areas commuters.”

Another constituent says:

“I no longer believe that the service is being run for my benefit...The additional London stops are unnecessary...very few people from south Essex get on or off at Barking or Upminster...c2c’s communications have been poor.”

Yet another says:

“In the AM peak, the number of trains servicing all the stations...has reduced...The changes on 16 May have absolutely NO effect for any commuter from Shoebury-Leigh on an ‘am’ peak service! In fact, the ONLY changes to Essex stations is that Benfleet has actually lost one train but West Horndon have gained two extra trains!”

I do not want to seem at odds with my parliamentary colleagues, for whom I have the greatest affection, and this should not be about one constituency against another. I am simply saying that I was not warned that these timetable changes would have an adverse impact on my constituents.

Within the first few months of this new timetable, a number of people have been taken ill owing to the cramped conditions. That is not something that just affects the unfortunate individual; it is also a cause of delay for trains that many people are relying on to get them to work on time. Pregnant women are unable to get a seat as there simply is not enough room for them to reach one once everyone has crammed on to the train and filled the gangways of the carriages. People have been unable to board and leave trains owing to the sheer volume of people, and that has even led to aggressive behaviour among passengers.

So how has the Member of Parliament for Southend West reacted to all this? Any Member who kept quiet about these issues would be failing in their duty. I do not want to be involved in this hoo-ha, but it all stems from 13 December. All I have done is represent the concerns of constituents about changes to the service. I felt that it was my duty not to be an apologist for c2c, but to represent my constituents’ concerns. As I have said, I have had, and continue to receive, lots of emails. Until Christmas last year, however, I had received absolutely no emails from constituents with complaints about the service, and no one said that trains should stop at Barking and Limehouse. No one said we had a huge increase in passengers and a crisis of numbers—not one word.

I do not like being misled, as I feel I have been by National Express, so I took great exception to the letter I received from the Conservative party chairman. During my time as a Member of the House, we have had many Conservative party chairmen. They are transitory in that role. The party chairman is not my boss. This particular chairman has done a fantastic job, raising an awful lot of money for our party. Someone wrote to me and said: “David, do you realise that the reason that National Express are trying to silence you is that they are big party donors to the Conservative party?” I certainly was not aware of that, so my office looked at the accounts. Apparently, in 2014 National Express gave £4,000 to the Conservative party and £2,500 to the Labour party nationally. It is having it both ways, but I do not regard those donations as in any sense tainting National Express’s views on the line.

The current chairman of National Express has only been chairman since 2013. I had a great regard for him and what he did with the Olympic stadium. He did a splendid job—I had the privilege of the chairing the London Olympic Games and Paralympic Games (Amendment) Bill Committee. However, I think National Express has got its PR slightly wrong. If I were the chairman, I would have said, “Get on the phone to the Member of Parliament and have a word.” I would not have written a letter to the party chairman. What was the party chairman supposed to do about it? It was absolutely ridiculous and it left a bad taste in my mouth.

I have raised the issue many times at business questions. The chairman of National Express has had a response to the letter he sent to the party chairman, although I have never seen the letter. The managing director of c2c sent me a letter last month. I am not suggesting that this Adjournment debate has triggered a huge amount of activity—it would be wrong of me to suggest that—but I am absolutely delighted with all that activity. I have since had a good meeting with the manager of c2c. He said he wants to work with me—there has never been any problem with his working with me and he knows where I am. The BBC radio interview was very unfortunate and childish. My hon. Friend the Minister absolutely insisted that all Members of Parliament affected by the line should be told at the same time about what is happening with the future timetable changes and rolling stock, but I was the only Member of Parliament who was not told. That was absolutely pathetic—I have the transcript of that radio interview.

Anyway, I want to draw a line under that. Personally, I have not suffered as a result of the timetable changes. I tend to avoid the peak commuting hours and usually return to Southend after midnight, so I have a comfortable journey and no complaints at all. I praise all the staff at Westcliff-on-Sea, Chalkwell and Leigh-on-Sea stations. They do an absolutely fantastic job.

I know my hon. Friend the Minister has no control over this but the quiet zone, which I always travel in, is a bit of a joke—not everyone can be hard of hearing. The ridiculous noisy mobile phone conversations one has to listen to in the quiet zone are really annoying. She will recall that at our meeting I shared with her the impact of football supporters’ disappointing bad behaviour on the train that day. I was very embarrassed about it, and it was frightening for some of the commuters. It was unfortunate that there seemed to be no one there to deal with the situation. Ironically, the very evening after the meeting with the Minister, there was an incident—resulting from football again—and we were stuck at Leigh-on-Sea station for half an hour while the person involved was taken off the train.

The following week, there was absolute chaos on the lines, which always makes one a little irritated. I got on the tube to Tower Hill, then to Liverpool Street station where I was told the trains were running, but then I was told to go back to Barking. In fact, there had been a tragedy. The train had just pulled out of Barking station when the train driver collapsed and died—an absolute tragedy for the family, and I know that Members will want to express their deep sympathy to the train driver’s friends and family.

My other current annoyance is the building works between Tower Hill and Fenchurch Street station. For nearly a year, a building has been re-developed, resulting
in commuters having to navigate their foot passage between Fenchurch Street and Tower Hill. It is an absolute disgrace, and no apology has been offered. The City of London Corporation and Tower Hamlets Council keep sending this backwards and forwards, while not a thing is done about it. It will be a war of attrition until the work is actually completed. I think that commuters are owed an apology—not from the Minister, but from the people who are developing this new property.

In conclusion, we are told that there will be further timetable changes this month and more rolling stock. Well, let us see exactly how that turns out. As the House has heard, my constituents have lost faith in National Express and c2c, and I am not absolutely sure why commuters who are served by Leigh-on-Sea, Chalkwell and Westcliff stations should celebrate these changes to a service that is slowly promising to go back to what it was before 13 December, when it was a happy line. I was contacted by Which? today with a briefing on the Consumer Rights Act 2015, but I shall write to the Minister about that. It concerns the Government’s indication that they will further exempt the rail industry from certain provisions of the Consumer Rights Act until October 2017, including section 57 relating to liability.

Let me now use the dreadful expression “lessons learned”. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East has already raised this with the Minister. He is very keen for all trains on the c2c line to take less than hour—hence his “Shoebury to Fenchurch Street in less than 60 minutes” campaign. I certainly support him in that. It means sacrificing some punctuality for greater speed. My hon. Friend wants c2c to remove the metro branding, because Southend is neither metropolitan nor part of the London metropolis, and he also wants new stock and small changes to the timetable, which would be welcome. He feels that the Government should call for further action if that does not work. Most of the constituents of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford, whom I feel sure will be in his place before the debate finishes, catch the train at Leigh-on-Sea, and I know that he supports me in all that I have shared with the House this evening.

The lesson I have learned is that I cannot take at face value what c2c and National Express have told me. The lesson they should learn is not to make an enemy of my good self, because I can be someone’s worst enemy and best friend. One of my many failures is that I remember everything and bear grudges—it is a terrible thing to admit! I have said, however, that I am prepared to draw a line under what has happened since 13 December and start afresh on this journey.

The Minister knows that I am an optimist. That is how I have managed to survive in this place for 33 years, and I will keep fighting until I see the service restored for my constituents. I hope that there will be a brighter future not only for c2c commuters, but for Greater Anglia line commuters, too.

4.59 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): Before I kick off—I know that we have until 7 pm, but I have no intention of detaining the House for as long as that—let me offer my heartfelt thanks to the House staff, and, indeed, to the Whips Office. The House was dealing with a very complicated piece of business, but thanks to plenty of clock watching and organisation, we arrived in the Chamber bang on time, like the best-run trains.

I am pleased to see the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), sitting on the Bench beside me. He will not be able to speak, because of his ministerial position, but he has left me in no doubt of his views. My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) has also been in touch with me many times about this line, along with others.

It has been a real pleasure to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), both today and on occasions when he has raised other issues. It is always important for us to listen and learn from experience and history, and he has left us in no doubt about his long-term commitment to improving rail services for his constituents, as well as about his disappointment that the service changes have caused so much disruption. I am always happy to listen to him, and I admire his ongoing optimism, which is a good thing to have in this place.

Like many other Members who use this line—and I should, of course, also mention my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe)—my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West has been very vocal about the timetable changes that were introduced by c2c in December. He was, however, an equally vocal supporter of c2c during the turnaround of what had been the misery line. Although I do not believe in revisiting history, I think that it would be helpful for me to explain, very briefly, how we got to where we are, and then talk about where we are going, because I too want us to move forward with complete confidence.

Of course, we no longer have nationalised railways, as we did when my hon. Friend became a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department, and that, I believe, is one of the reasons why the railways have been successful. We pull slightly different levers now. We do not get British Rail operators and managers in so that we can beat them up, because there are those different levers in our contracts, and, of course, we listen carefully to the customers who, ultimately, are paying for the services. We rely on highly skilled train operators to respond to the changing needs of their customers.

There had been big improvements in performance on the c2c lines, along with enormous growth. In five years, 15% more passengers had travelled on c2c trains. However, there had been no timetable changes for more than a decade. I think it is always right to ask operators to try to change their timetables in order to benefit those who use their services. Proposals were made by c2c in response—a strong response—to the heartfelt cases made by passengers who wanted to get on or off at Barking and West Ham, but also in response to the fact that those stations were, and are, among the most crowded in the network, and to the need for more connectivity.

The new timetable had some benefits, and it was supposed to benefit my hon. Friend’s constituents. The number of seats on trains from Westcliff that reached Fenchurch Street between 8 am and 9 am should have increased by 12%. Indeed, the number of seats on trains arriving at Fenchurch Street from Leigh-on-Sea did
increase by a sizeable 53%, because so many trains were starting from there rather than arriving already laden. However, there were what could almost be termed unintended consequences. Clever London commuters began to realise that they could use those trains rather than trains on the District line.

I want the train companies to take people in and out of the metropolis, especially the many who are paying a great deal of money for their season tickets. I do not want those lines to be substitutes for existing tube lines, which, incidentally, is not very economical, because, I understand, only the tube fare is reimbursed. However, it is never entirely possible to predict what passengers are going to do, and, as was clear to my officials and me, and indeed to c2c, overcrowding rapidly became a problem on peak-time services. People who had been able to get seats for many years were now having to stand, and we saw some really uncomfortable overcrowding.

I think that people had been led to expect better from the line, because the percentage of passenger satisfaction, which 10 years ago was a meagre 63, has gone up into the 90s. It is the best performing rail passenger franchise in terms of passenger satisfaction, and it is up there in terms of punctuality. c2c has also been very innovative. It has introduced automatic compensation, for example, and per-minute compensation for delays. So if you sign up for its key card, it will automatically reimburse you at a rate of 3p per minute if your train arrives more than two minutes late. That is the kind of thing we want to see across the network.

It was therefore an unexpected negative that we suddenly had this crowding, and the question was: what were we going to do about it? I could not call everyone in and give them a talking to, but we had to get the company to respond. In fact, it wanted to respond very quickly, and there was an immediate adjustment to the timetable. My hon. Friend the member for Southend West was kind enough to bring in some of his constituents to talk to me, and one of the questions they asked was how we know how many people are getting on and off the trains. c2c actually has monitoring technology and it knows exactly how many people are on each train. This means that it can flex and adjust the trains quite quickly. It immediately changed the timetable, lengthened some of the trains and reduced some of the stops. It tried to improve the capacity on the fast services, which are the most crowded. Understandably, people will always choose to travel on the fast services even if there are seats available on the slightly slower services either side of them.

So some changes happened immediately, but we wanted that to be just the start. As my hon. Friend has pointed out, there was a contractual obligation in relation to the timetable for 95% of the stops to involve stations such as Barking. Working with my excellent officials, I said to c2c, “We just want you to sort this out for your customers. If you need to come back to us and propose that that limit should go, that will be absolutely fine.” So another series of stopping changes will be happening this week, on 15 May. At the moment, 98% of the evening services departing from Fenchurch Street stop at Barking, but that will drop by almost a quarter to 76%.

The aim is to get people who are going to Barking by train back on to the tube. In that way, they would no longer be occupying seats for two or three stops and forcing long-distance commuters from my hon. Friend’s constituency—and, indeed, from my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East’s constituency—to stand. We are already seeing those adjustments. There will be another series of my changes later this year, and the operator will continue to monitor the situation. I know that my hon. Friend is interested in this, and he will be able to see almost hour-by-hour crowding charts for these trains to show what the impact has been.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West rightly said, we do not want to rob Peter to pay Paul. There is a whole series of constituencies along this line, and we expect the operators to work closely with the local MPs and local authorities to ensure that they are delivering the best possible service. Sometimes there will be tensions involved, depending on where trains start and finish and where they stop along the way. However, I completely understand his request for faster services. There is infrastructure work going on, and I agree with him that Shoebury in 60 minutes would be a great thing, but that would require some other timetable changes which could be difficult to deal with in the round. However, that is the right aspiration to have. So there will be further timetable changes, and I want to ensure that we have the House in no doubt about my absolute commitment to getting this right. This is a really good operator and I think that, up until last Christmas, most of the constituents represented by Members in the House today would have agreed with that.

We then asked the operator to go further and to provide new rolling stock. It is clear that one of the problems is that it simply does not have enough trains. It immediately went out and sourced new rolling stock, and 24 new carriages will come into operation progressively over the next few months. That might not sound like a lot, but they will provide 13,000 extra seats at peak times every week. An additional 32 carriages are being procured and will be introduced after October 2019. That means that, by 2024, the new franchise will have 68 additional new vehicles in service along the route. That might not be enough—we don’t know. Growth on the railway continues to exceed all expectations. It is a wonderful thing that people choose to travel by rail, but we need constantly to monitor these organisations to ensure they are delivering.

My hon. Friend raised an important point about the company’s engagement. I know that he feels let down by some of the communication issues, and I am sure that no one wants that. However, c2c has committed to meeting passengers and to getting them involved in the timetable changes. It held a “meet the manager” event at Fenchurch Street station in November, and I understand that it was a robust meeting.

Sir David Amess: May I take my hon. Friend back to what she said about new rolling stock? Did she say “2019”? What she tell the House whether the carriages will be built in this country and whether they will be arriving all at once or over a period?

Claire Perry: I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that the trains will be British and built by Bombardier. Some of them are already under construction. They have been procured by one of the rolling stock companies for just this sort of thing and to add capacity wherever it was bid for. They will start to be introduced later this year, so relief is coming. The expectation is that the full fleet will be in operation by October 2019.
As I said, the trains are being built by Bombardier in Derby, and the supply chain that that supports is absolutely immense. My hon. Friend’s line does not yet have the space for them, but he may be interested to hear that the new high-speed intercity express trains, which will be running up and down the east and west coast mainlines, are now being built in Newton Aycliffe. For the first time in many years, the UK now has two train manufacturing sites, supporting hundreds of jobs directly and thousands of skilled jobs in the supply chain, which is incredibly exciting. The trains will provide relief and will be brand new, so customers will hopefully be able to see and feel the benefits.

I want to return to the consultations and the conversations that have been happening. I hope my hon. Friend will agree that the franchise management team has not been shy in talking to its customers. In fact, it has frequently consulted its customers on many issues.

Sir David Amess: I feel a little guilty that, when there was this—how can I put it?—gathering of people at Fenchurch Street station at the beginning of the year, it was not fully explained that it was a “meet the manager” event. I would not want to criticise the UKIP MEP who represents the area including the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), but he seemed to take over the meeting, which was a bit unfortunate. Will the Minister share with the House any detail of what format future “meet the manager” meetings might take?

Claire Perry: Some politicians—my hon. Friend is not one of them—campaign on things about which they know nothing entirely to raise the temperature of the moment. I might say that the gentleman just referred to is an example of such a politician. The temperature was raised and I believe that there were shouts of, “Out! Out! Out!” First, that would be a terrible situation to be in. Secondly, if someone is trying to explain quite complicated changes that were made in good faith—I am not defending the management team here, but the changes were made in good faith in response to a new contract—then that is not a constructive atmosphere in which to have a conversation.

Sir David Amess: Our right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) is anxious that his constituents are involved in “meet the manager” meetings. Does the Minister have any information to share with him? Will there be specific meetings for his constituents or will they be taking place in London?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend pre-empted what I was about to say on the process. It is great to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who is also an assiduous campaigner, here on the Front Bench.

Interestingly, only some 9% of journeys are made by rail. That figure rises to 30% in the London area, and 70% of all rail journeys begin and end in London. Rail seems to have a disproportionate impact here; we all love our trains and we hate it when things go wrong, which is why I feel I am perhaps not the most popular but the most lobbied Minister. Everyone wants a piece of railway action.

My hon. Friend has invited me to comment on what the “meet the manager” schedule looks like, and I am happy to do so. The sessions are starting this month at London stations. In July, they will be going out to stations in mid-Essex, and finally they will be at stations in the Southend area in October. These are “meet the manager” questions; the intention is to explain what is happening, with the manager answering questions about the trains. All these events will be advertised a week in advance. My hope is that enough people can attend so that there can be a constructive conversation about the changes. I have to say that I do have confidence in this managerial team. I meet them frequently, as I do with all the franchise operators, and they have been particularly assiduous in recognising the problem and trying to solve it.

Let me say something about the West Ham football fan problem. All of us have seen the pictures, where football fans—or, indeed, rugby fans; we should not be “sportist” about this—have got on a train and behaved in a manner that can be described only as intimidating. I have experienced that, and I often find, as a woman on the network and a mother of two daughters, that it can be very concerning. West Ham is a Transport for London-operated station, so TfL has overall responsibility for operating the station, for security and for crowd control. On a match day, the British Transport police rightly look at the whole c2c route when constructing their plans and then share those with TfL, with c2c providing staff to TfL at West Ham station at busy times, including match days. The operation tends to focus on Barking, because it is the main station for the stadium. In addition, c2c provides roving security teams on board the affected trains, which is helpful. I was pleased to hear my hon. Friend tell us of his most recent experience, as it seems the fans were better behaved, or perhaps the team won—
Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), a parliamentary neighbour, for securing this important Adjournment debate. I do not come from Southend, but one of my researchers does and so makes this trip regularly and understands the challenges that my hon. Friend, in securing this debate, has spoken about. Can the Minister confirm the importance, in whatever is done to improve train services to Southend, of British rolling stock being considered in that innovation and development, particularly those of Bombardier, which has a unit very close to my constituency? Trains to Southend are important. It may be that Chips Channon, the former Member, used to drive around in his Rolls-Royce and would come up to London in it, but many people, including my researcher, have to make the journey by train.

Claire Perry: I am delighted that my hon. Friend saw what we were discussing on the annunciatior and rushed into the Chamber to make those points on behalf of his researcher. What is fascinating about working in the DfT is that many of our staff who commute by train sit around with their official hats on saying all the right things, but as soon as someone opens up a debate about what it was like at Victoria station or another London station that morning, everyone surges back to reality and describes what it is actually like commuting on the network.

I am not sure whether my hon. Friend was in his place when we talked about the new rolling stock that will be coming into service on this line over the next few months. It is built by Bombardier, and part of it has already been procured by Porterbrook, one of the rolling stock companies. It is a very exciting development. I have visited Bombardier many times. In fact, I have driven a train on its test track. Not many Ministers can say that—actually, I am sure that every rail Minister has probably said the same thing. Bombardier is building the Crossrail fleet as well as the S-class trains—the new worm trains as we call them—that are currently running on the tube network. They are wonderful as they can clear a whole platform of many hundreds of people in a matter of moments.

What is exciting in all of this is that a single line, such as the one we are discussing today, encapsulates so much of what is going on across the whole rail network. First of all, we have unprecedented levels of passenger demand. Although people might wonder whether privatisation was the right thing to do—I do not think that—what we can say is that our railways have never been busier. At no time since the 1920s, pre-Beeching, have we had so many passengers. Indeed, passenger numbers and journeys have doubled since privatisation, largely because of the energy, commitment and fair innovation of many of these private companies. My hon. Friend will recall from the pre-privatisation days that it was not this Mecca of wonderful customer service that people like to cook up. I used to take the line from university to home, and all we could get was a curled up old sandwich if we were lucky and there was no apology if we were late.

Let me mention the compensation scheme—hopefully, my hon. Friends’ trains are never delayed, and so they never have to claim. I urge them to sign up for the automatic season ticket—the key card—because then they get compensation automatically. Our compensation schemes are among the most generous in Europe. People always talk about compensation. Of course we want it to get to the right people, but let me explain the levels that we pay. A person will get 50% compensation if their train is delayed by 30 minutes and 100% compensation if it is delayed by 60 minutes.

Assiduous Members will have seen that, in our manifesto, we have a commitment to introducing compensation payments if the train is delayed by 15 minutes. I am happy to tell the House that we are working up that proposal. I am looking forward to announcing it as soon as permitted. It is an important development, because on many of these lines, where the journey time is not hours, but minutes, it will mean that we can all claim should the trains be late. [Interruption.] There is an awful lot of excellent dancing going on behind the Speaker’s Chair. The aim of all our proposals is that we should not have delayed trains. We should have trains that run exactly to time.

Christopher Pincher: Quite rightly, the Minister says that we must not have late or delayed trains. Does she also agree that trains in Southend and elsewhere should not be overcrowded as well as delayed? One reason why trains are sometimes overcrowded is that fair prices rise rapidly or fall rapidly at certain times. Perhaps if we were able to look at a pricing mechanism that did not have these cliff-face increases or falls, we would be able to spread the load over the railways, rather than having a few people trying to crowd on to a few trains at specific times.

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about pricing and fares. Of course people want to feel that they are getting value for money, but if I may again clock some of the great things that the Government have done for rail users, it is important to note that we have frozen rail fares for the duration of this Parliament at RPI plus zero. That is worth about £700 million to the fare-paying public and will save the average season ticket holder about £425 over the course of the Parliament.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher) makes an important point about peak and shoulder fares, as they are called. It seems that people either feel or are told by their employers that they have to get to work at a certain time, so that is when they travel. We could be far more creative and innovative in trying to get people off the peak and on to the shoulders by using pricing and, potentially, conversations with employers. What tends to happen in this country is that we buy lots and lots of trains to fill peak demand, and they run empty for large portions of the day. That is not an economic thing to do.

Sir David Amess: This is the last time I will intervene on my hon. Friend because the debate must end. We think of the film “Brief Encounter” and about how romantic the carriages used to be, with the leather strap one would pull down at the window and all of that, but she is absolutely right that we see these things through rose-coloured glasses. Before she finishes, can she give any indication of when the franchise decision for the Greater Anglia line will be taken?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend invites me to comment, but all I can tell him is that it will happen shortly. Thanks to the changes to franchising that have been...
made in the Department, the level of customer-facing benefits, including new rolling stock, has never been higher. On that particular franchise, where it is absolutely right that we get rid of some of the outdated rolling stock and get some new trains, the score that a franchise bidder will get for new rolling stock has never been higher. I confidently expect, just as we saw with Northern, the TransPennine Express and Virgin East Coast, that we will see some great benefits for consumers.

I have been given the opportunity to have a full discussion about many of the positive things that are happening on the railways. I could carry on all night because I have so much more to say. I welcome the fact that, as we are all aware, we are not going back to the misery line. There have been unintended consequences of some decisions that were taken in a genuine attempt to improve connectivity. There is an absolute commitment on the part of the operator and the Department to make sure that the changes are put in place, that new rolling stock comes in and that the constituents who have been represented so ably here today by my hon. Friends get the service they deserve.

The most refreshing thing I heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West, who is an eternal optimist, is that we are all prepared to draw a line under the episode and start afresh, determined to deliver for our constituents. That is why we are all here.

Question put and agreed to.

5.27 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Thursday 12 May 2016

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The Secretary of State was asked—

New Energy Technologies

1. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What steps she is taking to encourage innovation in new energy technologies which are both cheap and clean. [904987]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): Encouraging and supporting innovation is central to everything we do. The United Kingdom has a proud record of leadership in energy innovation, through, for instance, our success in driving down the costs of offshore wind technology. The Government took steps to build on that in last year’s spending review, more than doubling our energy innovation budget over the next five years to a total of £500 million. With that budget, we can continue to support the development of clean, cheap and reliable technologies.

Mark Pawsey: I recently visited two farmers in my constituency. J.C. Channing and Sons is generating electricity through anaerobic digestion, while Dale Aston of Brinklow Biogas is using the same process to generate and supply biogas via a connection to the national grid. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating those entrepreneurs, who are demonstrating considerable innovation in the use of new technologies, and will she tell us a little more about how the Government are supporting the sector?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is, of course, right. One of the biggest challenges that we face is how to decarbonise our heat and electricity supplies over the coming decade. Anaerobic digestion has played an important role in meeting the challenge to date, providing low-carbon heat and electricity for consumers in the United Kingdom. I congratulate employers such as those in my hon. Friend’s constituency who, by using food and farm waste, are helping to deliver the kind of renewable energy that we need.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I ask the Minister to get out a bit more? I walk around my constituency talking to environmentalists and to the big companies that invest in new technology, and they say that the stops and starts and changes in Government policy, especially in the Treasury, have deeply harmed innovation and research in this area.

Amber Rudd: I am sorry to hear that from the hon. Gentleman, but the facts speak for themselves. Investment in renewable technology and energy is at a record high in the UK, and the Government are always careful to consult before making changes so that we take industry with us and deliver the stability that it needs.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): Far and away the most dominant form of low-carbon electricity in Europe is nuclear power. In the context of nuclear innovation, will the Secretary of State update us on the small modular reactor competition?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is, of course, absolutely right. Nuclear power is an important part of the energy mix that we continue to need, and the Government support advances that will enable us to replace our ageing nuclear fleet over the coming decades. Since we launched the SMR competition we have received 38 expressions of interest, and we will be working closely with those companies to ensure that the competition proceeds in the way that is most likely to generate investment.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Late last month the United States Senate passed an energy Bill, in a rare occurrence of bipartisan co-operation. The Bill could unleash billions of dollars for research and development in new energy technologies, including energy storage, hydrokinetic and marine R and D, and advance the electricity grid in the US. Can we expect the United Kingdom Government to act in a similar manner, investing in the future and addressing the myriad problems that affect our energy infrastructure?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady will know that the Climate Change Act 2008, which underpins the drive towards renewable energy in this country, was passed on a cross-party basis, and our work in developing a low-carbon future remains absolutely cross-partisan. This Conservative Government are committed to ensuring that we invest and plan for the long term, so that we can develop that renewable energy, while always ensuring that we do so at the least possible cost and put energy security first.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that supporting the innovative electric vehicles industry is an excellent way of protecting the environment while also backing UK businesses? If so, will the Government do all they can to support that new technology for the benefit of the environment and business?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The future for transport is indeed electric, and the Department for Transport has clear plans to develop and support the electric vehicles industry. I am proud to say that one in four of the electric cars that are currently being driven around Europe was made in the UK, and I hope that the UK will continue to be a leader in this developing industry.
**John Pugh** (Southport) (LD): Will the Secretary of State update us on the strike price for tidal energy, and on the negotiations surrounding it?

**Amber Rudd**: The hon. Gentleman may be aware that we have recently launched a consultation on tidal energy, headed by Charles Hendry. In regard to tidal stream, which he might also be asking about, we have yet to decide how the pot 2 allocation will be taken forward.

**Smart Meters**

2. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps is her Department taking to ensure that consumers’ data on smart meters are accessible to and controllable by those consumers; and how she plans to monitor the effectiveness of those steps.

**Amber Rudd**: The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): I welcome the hon. Member. Support for smart meters, and I am sure she will agree that their roll-out is a vital step towards putting consumers firmly in control of their energy use. Consumers will need to have ready access to the data from their smart meters if we are to achieve that goal. That is why, all households will be offered an in-home display that will allow them to see the energy they are using in near real time, as well as its cost. We are also allowing suppliers to trial innovative technologies alongside that.

**Chi Onwurah**: Smart meters can transform domestic energy consumption and help to save the planet, but only if consumers are given secure control and ownership of their own data. The display options that the Secretary of State refers to will still allow smart meters to be a back door into our homes for hackers, so will she overcome her ridiculous complacency and announce measures to give consumers the digital rights that they deserve before it is too late?

**Amber Rudd**: The hon. Lady should know that privacy is absolutely protected and at the heart of the smart meter programme. She should be careful not to put fear into the hearts of people where none should exist. The data are protected, and they belong not to the Government—which some people might, not unreasonably, fear—but to the energy companies. We will always reassure consumers that privacy is at the core of delivering safe meters.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The Competition and Markets Authority has recommended a temporary safeguard for vulnerable users who have pre-payment meters, which could result in savings of up to £300 million a year for those consumers. Will the Secretary of State commit to implementing that measure as soon as possible to protect those vulnerable users?

**Amber Rudd**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The preliminary report from the Competition and Markets Authority addresses head-on the difficulties and higher costs often faced by people on pre-payment meters, and, yes, we will be implementing its recommendations. We look forward to seeing its final recommendations over the next few months.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): According to the Government’s own calculations, they reckon that with smart meters installed, we as a nation could save some £17 billion on our collective energy bills over the next 15 years. Does the Secretary of State recognise that if consumers had access to their detailed data usage, it would put them in a good position to share those data with third parties, should they want to, and that could improve competition, which the Government would obviously be glad to see?

**Amber Rudd**: Yes, the Government are glad that the Competition and Markets Authority has said that it will make available in a controlled way the details of people who have not switched. We will have to ensure that that is done in a way that does not result in consumers feeling overwhelmed by suggestions. The Competition and Markets Authority has yet to come up with its final solution on this point, but I am confident that it will do so in a measured way and that this will help to ensure that people who have not switched will have access to switching and to the opportunities that it provides.

**Offshore Wind: Scotland**

3. **John Nicolson** (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What steps she is taking to support the development of offshore wind energy generation in Scotland.

**Amber Rudd**: The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): The Government have announced up to £730 million of contracts for difference support for offshore wind and other renewables. The first auction later this year will offer £290 million, and I expect Scottish projects to bid. This is a huge opportunity for the UK supply chain, and I am doing everything I can to persuade developers to buy British.

**John Nicolson**: The Government have cancelled the contract for difference for the Neart na Gaoithe wind farm off the east coast of Scotland. Without that wind farm, there will be no such projects at all in Scottish waters. Will the Minister tell us why the contract has been cancelled? Will the Government commit to redeploying the funds to another Scottish project?

**Andrea Leadsom**: It is not the Government who decide whether a delivery milestone is met; it is the Low Carbon Contracts Company that manages those contracts for difference. That cancellation was the result of the milestone delivery date not being met, and there are ongoing discussions about that. I recognise that the termination of a CFD is disappointing for all partners, but I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that there is quite a big project pipeline for Scottish offshore wind and I expect to see other projects coming forward at the next auction.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con) rose—

**Mr Speaker**: Order. I am happy to hear the mellifluous tones of the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), but his inquiry must relate to Scotland rather than to Cleethorpes.

**Martin Vickers**: There is a direct link. Mr Speaker. Clearly, developments in the industry in Scotland will have an impact on the success or otherwise of the
development of the energy estuary, which is the Government’s ambition for the Humber. Will the Minister give us an update on how developments in Scotland might impact on the Humber?

Mr Speaker: Very neat!

Andrea Leadsom: I commend my hon. Friend for both his tenacity and his command of the English language. Whether from Scottish projects or from projects in the Humber region, this project pipeline will benefit the UK supply pipeline enormously. That is what we really want. He will be aware of the ongoing east coast review, and I am talking with individual developers to try to ensure that we buy British wherever possible and use UK fabricators, and that the UK has the opportunity to get more of this valuable business, which has been a real success story for the UK.

Callum McCaig: Scotland’s undoubted potential in offshore wind, and in renewables more generally, is being squandered by remote control from here in Westminster. When will the Department stop treating Scotland like an absentee landlord?

Andrea Leadsom: I am unsure whether saying, “What rubbish,” is unparliamentary, but, frankly, that was absolute rubbish. There is no sense in which the UK Government treat Scotland as if we were an absentee landlord. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that 60% of the renewables obligation has gone to projects in Scotland, which has about 8% of the population. How on earth can he think that Scotland is somehow losing out? That is absolute nonsense.

Callum McCaig: If we are not being run by remote control, will the Minister tell us how many times the Secretary of State has been to Scotland since the last election?

Andrea Leadsom: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I have been to Scotland a number of times.

Callum McCaig: Answer the question.

Andrea Leadsom: I do not know the answer, but I can write to the hon. Gentleman. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is absolutely committed, as am I, to the success of not only wind and the renewables sector in Scotland, but, importantly, the oil and gas sector. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the hours that she and I have spent in this Chamber desperately trying to get the Oil and Gas Authority sorted out through the Energy Bill, which he and his colleagues have tried to delay and scupper at every turn.

Electricity Pylons: Sensitive Environments

4. Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): What steps her Department plans to take to (a) require the undergrounding of power cables and (b) mitigate in other ways the effect of electricity pylons on sensitive environments.

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): It is quite right that network companies give proper consideration to the protection of communities and sensitive areas, and my hon. Friend is right to speak up for his local residents. I hope I can reassure him and his constituents that legislation already puts such a requirement on network companies. Local communities will always be properly consulted on how new transmission networks might affect their local environment.

Dr Davies: I am grateful for that reply. The Minister will be aware that many miles of new electricity cabling will be required across the country for new energy projects, including in my area of north Wales. When there is controversy, does she agree that the cost of delays to such infrastructure projects could far outweigh the cost of undergrounding sections of cabling in sensitive areas to help overcome such controversy? Does she also agree that planning guidance may need firming up to enable clarity around the requirement?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that getting on with projects and avoiding delays is important, and I am sure he will appreciate that there is a balance to be struck. A recent independent study showed that the undergrounding of transmission lines can cost up to £24 million per kilometre compared with up to £4.4 million per kilometre for overhead lines, and such costs are ultimately paid through consumer bills. I reassure him that existing planning guidance will ensure that undergrounding is always fully considered.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I want to ask the Minister about vertical infrastructure more broadly. We have pylons going through Cumbria, and my constituency has an awful lot of wind farms and telephone masts. How do we bring all of that together when we consider new planning?

Andrea Leadsom: I hope I can reassure the hon. Lady that local authority planning processes do always take into account the cumulative impact of yet one more project getting under way. I suppose that this is a question for the Department for Communities and Local Government, but the existing planning arrangements not only allow for proper local consultation and proper consideration of all the alternatives, including undergrounding to take infrastructure right out of sight, but consider what one more project will do and whether things can be brought together. If an area is affected, different projects can be undertaken in the same place, rather than being spread out and ruining the landscape.

Energy Bills

5. Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to reduce energy bills for businesses and households.

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): The best way to deliver on energy bills for businesses and households is to have a robust and competitive energy market. In 2010, the big six controlled 99% of the domestic retail market, but this year consumers can choose from more than 30 independent suppliers, who, between them, control more than 15% of the dual fuel market. Competition is improving, but we cannot be complacent, which is why I look forward to the final report of the Competition and Markets Authority and why I will continue to encourage consumers to switch.
Will Quince: I agree with the Secretary of State on that and thank her for that answer. The best way for consumers to get a good deal on their energy bills is to consider switching. Will she confirm that the Government remain committed to driving down the time it takes for consumers to switch?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Consumers are sometimes put off from switching not only by the complications that they perceive, but by the length of time it can take. We are working with Ofgem and are confident that it will reach reliable next-day switching by 2018.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): My hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change recently visited the award-winning eco-house in my constituency, where heating and lighting bills are kept below £100 a year. What action is the Minister going to take to promote carbon-neutral homes?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She is right to point out that some fantastic innovations are taking place through private sector business investment to make sure that innovations are delivered in this sector that will help to drive down bills. On zero-carbon homes, I can reassure her that a European Union directive, due to come in by 2020, calls for near-zero carbon emissions, which I believe will help to reduce people’s bills.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important to give more power to price comparison websites to help consumers find the best deal possible? That was one suggestion put forward by the CMA.

Amber Rudd: I agree with my hon. Friend that we have to have as many choices as possible for people, and the CMA has made some proposals, but we also have to be careful to ensure that this is addressed fairly, that the cheapest tariff is available and that there is full disclosure. I tend to encourage people to go to the Ofgem website beanenergyshopper.com.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): The Secretary of State is fond of telling us how keen she is to cut energy bills, but last Friday, when attention was diverted elsewhere, her Department revealed that families in this country will be asked to pay up to an extra £38 on their energy bills to fund her failure to get new power stations built. Can she confirm to this House that not only is she asking families to pay more to fund her policy of closing coal-fired power stations, but, at exactly the same time, she is going to ask them to pay more to keep them open?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady is referring to the changes to the capacity market, and I am concerned that she has not grasped the facts of the situation, which are that wholesale prices have fallen, with the consequence being that coal prices, and indeed some gas prices, become uneconomic. Because the Government will take no risks with energy security and because we are absolutely clear that it must be the No. 1 priority, we have brought forward a new capacity market that will stop there being the sort of price hikes which are most unwelcome. My Department estimates that this will actually save consumers up to £46 on their bills.

Lisa Nandy: The absurdity of the situation appears to be completely lost on the Secretary of State, but as she has been on this panic spending spree recently perhaps I could ask her another question. She recently announced generous subsidies to EDF, the big energy company that operates Britain’s nuclear fleet. She has agreed to hand over £153 million in 2018 and a further £139 million the following year to subsidise nuclear power stations that would have been open in any case. Is she aware of the recent news that the cost of Hinkley Point C is set to rise to £21 billion, which is £3 billion more than was forecast? What is her estimate of the cost to bill payers and taxpayers in the UK of this new revised figure?

Amber Rudd: I am concerned that the hon. Lady did not hear my answer to her earlier question. The fact is that energy security has to be the priority of government. In bringing forward changes to the capacity market, we have made sure that, with low wholesale prices, we have sufficient energy during the next two years. She just reveals her total lack of understanding of getting the right balance on secure electricity—nuclear and, yes, in the short term, coal—which supports our renewable investment, keeps bills low and ensures that customers always have a good supply of electricity.

Energy Tariffs

6. Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that energy consumers are on the best value energy tariff.

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): The most effective way for consumers to ensure that they are on the best value tariff is by engaging with the energy market and switching supplier. I encourage all Members to urge their constituents to engage with the market and make use of the readily available Ofgem-approved price comparison websites. Meanwhile, we will continue to make it easier for consumers to switch, and we are working with Ofgem and the industry to move to reliable next-day switching by 2018.

Andrew Bingham: High Peak is probably one of the coldest constituencies in England in the winter, so our household energy costs are probably disproportionately high compared with those in many other areas of the country. Has the Secretary of State made any assessment already of the trends of people changing suppliers and whether they are actually changing suppliers to keep those costs down?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure my hon. Friend. Friend that switching was at a four-year high in 2015, with 6.1 million electricity and gas switches across Great Britain—roughly a 15% increase on 2014. I am aware that some people are unable or unwilling to switch, which is why we have the big energy saving network programme. This year, that programme gave £10,000 of funding to two champions in High Peak who reached more than 350 customers directly, and trained 111 front-line staff. Over the year, more than 1,900 vulnerable customers were supported. It is important to reach all consumers.

Mr Speaker: Only last week, the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) owned up to having brought a hedgehog into the Chamber some years ago—I am
pleased to say that it was not during my tenure of the Chair. With all the reference to price comparison websites, I am glad that no one has thought it necessary to bring a meerkat into the Chamber.

Pre-pay Meters

7. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What her Department’s policy is on the implementation of the Competition and Markets Authority proposals for consumers on pre-pay meters. [904994]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): The Government agree with the Competition and Markets Authority that consumers on pre-pay meters are getting a poor deal. Supporting such consumers was at the heart of our decision to support the CMA investigation in the first place. The hon. Lady may have seen the estimate by Citizens Advice that 23% of households in her constituency have pre-payment meters, which is above the national average of 16%. That is why it is so important that we take on board the recommendations of the CMA following the publication of its final report.

Jessica Morden: In Wales, a staggering one fifth of households are on pre-payment meters, paying up to £330 a year more for gas and electricity than those on the cheapest tariff. It is particularly important for Wales, and for those 7,200 households in my constituency, that we know which recommendations the Government will be working with the CMA and Ofgem and when constituents will start to see the benefit. Can the Minister be specific?

Amber Rudd: We do not yet have the specific recommendations, but the hon. Lady will, like me, be aware that what we have had proposed so far in the draft recommendations is a safeguard tariff for those people on pre-payment meters. It is not clear yet whether that will be temporary or long term, but we will look carefully at the recommendations of the CMA to get the best outcome for the most vulnerable customers, which, I know, she desires as well.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): May I just push the Secretary of State once more on that, as the 4 million households who are still languishing on rip-off pre-payment meters would really like more detail from her? Given that the Government’s energy efficiency policies and fuel poverty strategy are in tatters, people would like more details on the timetable and when this will happen.

Amber Rudd: It is typical of the Opposition party that it is unable to understand the concept of the CMA, which is preparing this report. It is up to the CMA to come forward with the final recommendations, and it is its recommendations that we will be following. I must take issue too with the hon. Gentleman’s reference to “tatters”. This Government are absolutely committed to helping the most vulnerable. We are proud of the work that we are doing to reform our various schemes to support the most vulnerable, and that is something that we will continue to do to ensure that we always support the people most in need.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): May I press the Secretary of State a little further? My constituency of Heywood and Middleton is, sadly, in the top 50 for numbers of households with pre-payment meters, and

my constituents are being ripped off. What can the Secretary of State tell me that I can tell my constituents about how long they will continue to be ripped off by pre-payment meters?

Amber Rudd: I am sure that the hon. Lady has looked at the CMA’s report. It has a proposal for a safeguard tariff, and we welcome that. It is one of the key reasons why we were keen to propose this review by the CMA. We are expecting it to come forward with the final report soon. When it does so, we will act on the recommendations and hope that it will deliver what we and she hope it will, which is support for people on pre-payment meters, who are often the most vulnerable.

State Aid Clearance: Scottish Islands

9. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): When the application for state aid clearance for the remote Scottish islands will be submitted to the European Commission.

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): We have had extensive correspondence with the Commission during the pre-notification process. The Government will publish as soon as we can the decision about the contract for difference allocation round for all less-established technologies in pot 2, including strike prices. We will take all the steps needed to deliver the allocation, including submitting any necessary notifications to the European Commission.

Mr Carmichael: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer, but she will know that the application for state aid clearance for the island strike price has been ready and sitting in the Department since the new year. The continuing failure to submit it is causing enormous uncertainty and a massive loss of confidence among renewable energy generators in the Northern and Western Isles. Will she agree to meet me and the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil), along with a delegation of local renewable energy developers, to discuss this so that she can hear from the horse’s mouth and understand just how serious it is for our industry and our islands?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman and the Chair of the Select Committee on Energy and Climate Change met my officials only recently to discuss these issues. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that my officials have also met several representatives of the renewables industry specifically to discuss remote island wind. I will certainly be happy to meet the remote islands forum again to discuss our decisions once we have taken them.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does the Minister not agree that the very fact that we have to go begging to the European Union before we can help our fellow citizens in this country amply demonstrates why we would be better off, and why those citizens would certainly be better off, if we left the European Union, took charge and were able to decide for ourselves how we spent taxpayers’ money in this country?
Andrea Leadsom: What I can say as an Energy Minister is that the Government’s position is that the UK should stay in a reformed European Union.

**Coal-fired Power Stations**

10. Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): When her Department plans to start its consultation on the phasing out of coal-fired power stations.

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): We are among the first developed countries to consult on phasing out coal. It is vital for our decarbonisation that we move away from the dirtiest fossil fuels, so holding a consultation is extremely important to make sure that we get views on how best to achieve our goal while ensuring energy security, which, as the hon. Lady will know, is non-negotiable. The consultation will begin in the near future.

Christina Rees: I am grateful to the Minister for her response. There are still many people in the UK, in Wales and, indeed, in my constituency of Neath, who work in or are connected with the coal industry. What assurances will the Minister provide that the consultation will be properly thought through and will take time to explore the issues thoroughly so as not to leave people unduly concerned for their livelihoods?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is exactly right to speak out for her community, which is precisely why we are undertaking the consultation. We want to take all the factors into account. I am sure that she and Opposition Members will agree that it is right that we move away from the dirtiest fossil fuels over time, but in a measured way, taking into account the impact on local communities and their livelihoods and what other opportunities there are for them in the energy space and in the workplace. I can totally assure her that we will consult carefully.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): The consultation that the Secretary of State mentioned reveals an intention by the Government to provide 55TW hours of renewable heat by 2020. That is 9% of UK heating, but it is 3% less than the original 2020 renewable heat target. How does she intend to hit that target, given that there is now a shortfall in heat and in transport?

Amber Rudd: I can assure my hon. Friend that the Government are providing support for small and medium-sized biomass companies through a range of incentives, including the renewables obligation, the feed-in tariff and the renewable heat incentive. We expect biomass to play an important role in industrial processes and district heating, where there are fewer alternatives for low-carbon technologies, and we want to ensure that we bring forward deployment in these areas.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): The consultation that the Secretary of State mentioned reveals an intention by the Government to provide 55TW hours of renewable heat by 2020. That is 9% of UK heating, but it is 3% less than the original 2020 renewable heat target. How does she intend to hit that target, given that there is now a shortfall in heat and in transport?

Amber Rudd: It is more about the number of houses or businesses that we support for the renewable heat incentive and not always about the pure cost. It is not necessarily about the league table of costs, but rather about the outcomes that we get. We are consulting on the renewable heat incentive to ensure that we deliver the best value for the taxpayer. I am committed to making sure that we use the money in the most cost-effective way.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): The Secretary of State did not address the question of the relationship of the renewable heat incentive proposals and finances to the UK’s contribution to the EU renewables target of 12% by 2020. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) mentioned a moment ago, we are still short of that target. Is the Secretary of State confident that the measures and finances that she has suggested in the new RHI proposals will enable us to reach that target, or is she actively considering other measures to make sure that we do?
Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the renewables target for 2020 covers building, heat, transport and electricity. The renewable heat incentive is a key part of that. That is why we have had the consultation. We will now examine those responses in order to ensure that we direct the funds that we have in the most effective way. We recognise that although we have made good progress towards the renewables target for 2020, there is more work to do. We believe that we have sufficient policies to address the need, but we are going to look at what else can be done, particularly in respect of buildings and transport, to make more progress from the halfway mark that we have reached so far.

Solar Photovoltaic Systems

13. Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What assessment has she made of trends in the level of take-up of domestic solar photovoltaic systems since the relaunch of the feed-in tariff in February 2016.

[905002]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): In the first quarter of our new, more sustainable cost control regime under FITs, six out of 11 deployment caps were reached, including the two largest of the four solar caps. Take-up of domestic solar photovoltaic systems is strong but still within the cap. We estimate that FITs will support over 178,000 new solar PV installations at domestic scale by 2018-19.

Helen Hayes: Domestic solar installers in my constituency report that demand for their services has plummeted over the past year, and domestic solar installations across the country are down 80% on this time last year. Will the Minister now acknowledge that the new tariff is too low and that the disastrous approach that this Government are taking to solar energy is effectively stopping individuals who want to make a contribution to combating climate change in their own homes by installing solar panels from doing so?

Andrea Leadsom: No, I do not recognise what the hon. Lady says. Solar deployment in this country has been amazing, and far in excess of all our expectations. Some 99% of solar installations have taken place since 2010—under this Government and the previous Government of all RHI technologies, and the evidence suggests that nearly 50% of RHI respondents said they would have installed it anyway, even without Government subsidy. We always need to look at the balance between keeping the costs down for the bill payer and supporting these technologies.

Green Research and Development

15. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to encourage growth in the green research and development sector.

[905005]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will take Questions 15 and 19 together.

The Government are taking steps to build on our proud history of energy innovation and are more than doubling our energy innovation budget over the next five years to a total of £500 million. With this budget we can continue to support the development of clean, cheap and reliable technologies and the growth of the green research and development sector across the UK.

Mr Speaker: We would take this question with Question 19 if the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) were here, but he is not, so we will not. I do not know what has happened to the chappie, but I hope he is all right.

Maria Caulfield: I thank the Secretary of State for her reply. With the new Rampion offshore wind farm being based in the Newhaven enterprise zone in my constituency, and with the recent opening of the university technical college in Newhaven, does the Secretary of State agree that Newhaven town has the potential to be a hub for green research and development, and could she outline how the Government can support that?

Amber Rudd: I welcome the activity already under way in my hon. Friend’s constituency and will of course be considering opportunities to support research, development and demonstration across the UK as we develop our energy innovation programme. I encourage her to speak directly with low-carbon energy funding bodies, which stand ready to support innovation in the renewable heat incentive. As the right hon. Gentleman will be aware, the consultation, which closed on 27 April, included a proposal to withdraw RHI support for solar thermal technologies. We are looking carefully at all the responses. I can assure him that in coming to our conclusions we will consider all relevant factors, including the impact on the UK supply chain.

Tom Brake: Does the Minister accept that solar thermal has the lowest CO₂ footprint of all heating generation technologies, has no significant ongoing fuel commitments, has relatively low space requirements and is ideal for homes for vulnerable people because there is no requirement for homes to be heavily insulated? Why are the Government proposing to cut support for solar thermal?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely agree that it certainly plays a part, but I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that, as part of the reform of the RHI, we are trying to ensure that the budget offers the best value for money. Solar thermal requires the highest subsidy from the Government of all RHI technologies, and the evidence suggests that nearly 50% of RHI respondents said they would have installed it anyway, even without Government subsidy. We always need to look at the balance between keeping the costs down for the bill payer and supporting these technologies.
Biomass Heating Industry: Renewable Heat Incentive

16. Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of changes proposed in the renewable heat incentive consultation on the biomass heating industry. [905008]

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): My Department is currently considering responses to our recent consultation on reform of the renewable heat incentive. As part of this consultation, we have engaged extensively with the relevant trade bodies and industry stakeholders to understand the impact of the proposed reforms, including, specifically, the impact on the biomass industry.

Ronnie Cowan: Currently, the biomass industry directly supports the jobs of 11,500 people, as well as 590 companies, across the UK. With that in mind, will the Minister explain the UK Government’s apparent lack of ambition with respect to the installation of biomass boilers, which will lead to job losses in this sector?

Amber Rudd: I am aware of the importance of the biomass industry to the hon. Gentleman, his constituency and, indeed, Scotland overall. That is why we are consulting on the issue to make sure that we are fair with the money we have and that we deliver best value for taxpayers. Small biomass has an important role to play. The RHI budget is in fact trebling by 2020–21. We remain committed to developing the RHI and biomass, and we will come back with responses in due course.

17. Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): What steps she is taking to increase exploration for oil and gas in the North sea. [905009]

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): This year the Government have pulled out all the stops to support the oil and gas sector. This includes a fiscal package worth £1.3 billion over five years, £20 million for new seismic surveys and, of course, our core policy of establishing the Oil and Gas Authority, whose job is to maximise economic recovery from the North sea. This is a vital UK industry, and we are totally committed to keeping the UK continental shelf as an attractive destination for investment, securing hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Hannah Bardell: I thank the Minister for her answer, and I do appreciate the work that is being done. However, while the SNP welcomes the support announced in the Budget and what has been done, those who have lost their jobs in the north-east would not necessarily agree with her characterisation. It is essential that we listen to those in the industry who are calling for a strategic review of the fiscal and regulatory regime. What steps are being taken to review the tax rates and the investment allowance?

Andrea Leadsom: As I said, the Treasury has already taken enormous steps through fiscal policy towards the North sea to promote further oil and gas exploration. It is constantly looking at that; in fact, I am having a dinner next week to talk again to the maximising economic recovery group of operators and investors, the Oil and Gas Authority and so on to look at what more we can do, and the Treasury plays its full part in that.

However, we have to be clear that the Oil and Gas Authority is already transforming things such as production costs and the level of co-operation between different operators in the North sea. This is an incredibly important area. We have an inter-ministerial group, which I think is meeting again next week to discuss what more can be done. We are pulling out all the stops for the North sea.

Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Although I sympathise with the constituents of the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) who have lost their jobs in the North sea, would not the best thing for them be for us to create new jobs by allowing fracking in Scotland for those very people, with those skills, who have been denied the prospect of such jobs by the hypocrisy of the SNP Government in Scotland?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely agree. Obviously, it is a matter for the Scottish Government to decide, but one of the policy options I am looking at in my Department, together with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, is what more we can do in the energy space for those who have lost their jobs. For example, an experienced offshore engineer may well be able to retrain to work with offshore wind or even nuclear. There are therefore other opportunities in the energy space, and I know the Scottish Government are looking at that. I would certainly be delighted if they wanted to think again about the importance of shale gas.
Topical Questions

T1. [904977] Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): Our Energy Bill receives Royal Assent today. It is a vital part of our plan to ensure that our families and businesses have access to secure, clean and affordable energy. We are delivering on our manifesto commitment to end subsidies for onshore wind. We are also using the opportunity to support the Oil and Gas Authority with powers to drive greater collaboration and productivity in the industry. I thank the Bill Committee and my hon. Friend the Minister for making this possible and going through the Bill in such painstaking detail to deliver it.

Debbie Abrahams: Evidence from the Universities of Leicester and York has shown that sick and disabled people are particularly at risk of fuel poverty, especially after the recent social security cuts by this Government and the previous coalition. Will the Secretary of State approach the Chancellor again to look at better targeting of warm home discount funding, especially after her rebuff from him just before the Budget?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady will be aware that this Government, and this Department specifically, are refocusing our support, as far as possible, on to those who are most vulnerable. We have just closed the consultation on the warm home discount and we are looking at the results. She can rest assured that we will, as far as possible, target it at those who are most in need, which is the right thing to do.

T3. [904979] Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I have been contacted by a number of constituents who are concerned about fracking in Dorset. What reassurance can the Minister give to me and to my constituents about environmental considerations, about issues of public consultation and letting local residents have their say, and, importantly, about fracking being considered only in appropriate locations?

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): With regard to safety is absolutely paramount the industry for hydraulic fracturing. If there was any likelihood, chance or risk of any of the issues in the scare stories that the hon. Lady likes to propagate being real, this Government would not be looking at promoting this vital industry. We provide 40% of our own natural gas; the rest is imported from overseas. It is vital for our energy security that we continue to use home-grown resources wherever we can. It is also a massive jobs and growth opportunity for very many communities where employment is desperately needed, and she should take some interest in that.

Mr Speaker: The Minister, rather like the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), cannot be accused of excluding from her observations anything that might be in any way, at any time, to any degree material. She is certainly comprehensive; we are most grateful.

Andrea Leadsom: With regard to safety is absolutely paramount the industry for hydraulic fracturing. If there was any likelihood, chance or risk of any of the issues in the scare stories that the hon. Lady likes to propagate being real, this Government would not be looking at promoting this vital industry. We provide 40% of our own natural gas; the rest is imported from overseas. It is vital for our energy security that we continue to use home-grown resources wherever we can. It is also a massive jobs and growth opportunity for very many communities where employment is desperately needed, and she should take some interest in that.

T5. [904982] Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What progress has my right hon. Friend made in working with the big energy suppliers such as EDF Energy, partly located in my constituency, with regard to the roll-out of smart meters for the benefit of consumers?

Amber Rudd: I can assure my hon. Friend that we are working closely with all energy suppliers on those aspects of the roll-out to ensure that the consumer benefits are fully realised. Good progress has been made so far, with over 3 million meters installed, and there is evidence that those consumers are already saving energy. Recent research by British Gas shows that consumers with smart meters have reduced their energy consumption by around 3%, on average, for both gas and electricity.

T2. [904978] Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I hope that this will be a case of third time lucky. I have asked the Housing Minister this question twice, and I have also notified the Secretary of State’s office of the question, so I hope I am going to get a reply. What is the difference in the annual energy bill that a family in a zero-carbon home would have to pay as opposed to a family in a home that has the insulation and energy efficiency standards that the Government propose?

Amber Rudd: The right hon. Gentleman’s question starts from an incorrect premise. [Interruption.] I am trying to answer his question; bear with me. I think that he is referring to the zero-carbon proposal that was rejected by the other place last night, although it was agreed that a review would be ongoing. The problem with zero-carbon homes, as conceived in the Bill, was that they would add costs to the house. If we add costs to the house, we add costs, ultimately, to the house owner, the consumer and the bill payer. The problem with the allowable solutions portion was that it would act as a tax on home builders and, ultimately, it would be of no benefit to the homeowner.

T8. [904986] Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): The Committee on Climate Change recommended in its 2015 report to Parliament that the Government produce an effective policy framework on aviation carbon...
This week, we hear that the chief executive of the CMA recommended a price cap to protect my constituents from this indefensible overcharging.

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend has incorporated quite a few questions into that one question. What I can say to her is that the most important element of addressing airport emissions is to have an international agreement. We do not want to have a situation where the UK is trying to do something independently; it is important to have such an agreement EU-wide and internationally. We tried to get the proposal that she mentioned incorporated into the Paris climate change agreement, but it was not, so we are working with international partners through the International Civil Aviation Organisation to try to achieve an international agreement this autumn. I will certainly keep my hon. Friend updated.

T4. [904981] Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am going to push the Minister of State further on fracking, because a week tomorrow an important decision will be made. In Ryedale, one energy company wants to frack the beautiful landscape just south of the North York Moors national park. More than 4,000 well-informed local people want to protect their local community and environment. Who should have the greatest influence?

Andrea Leadsom: I say again: the shale industry is vital to the UK’s energy security future, and we absolutely support the idea of local consultation and local people having their say, but as in all planning matters—[Interruption.] If the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) could just stop chuntering for one minute—every time I try to answer a question, she chunter. There is a balance between the absolutely right case that local people should have their say, and the national interest. That is why there is a very clear local consultation process, and that is why the people of Ryedale will have their views taken into account and the local authority will balance up those interests.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What progress has my right hon. Friend made in securing new nuclear power stations and, in particular, modular power stations of a smaller scale?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: new nuclear is an essential part of a secure, reliable energy system. We are supporting new nuclear, but we are also particularly enthusiastic about small modular reactors, which is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor doubled the funds for our innovation budget and we have launched our competition. We hope that it will bring forward a great array of different proposals so that we can take forward a number of them.

T6. [904983] Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Citizens Advice estimates that 7,300 households in Wakefield are paying over £400 a year more for their gas and electricity than they should be paying because they are stuck on prepayment meters. Last month, the Competition and Markets Authority recommended a price cap to protect my constituents from this indefensible overcharging. This week, we hear that the chief executive of the CMA is to be the Department’s new permanent secretary. Does that mean we can look forward to him implementing his own recommendations in the very near future?

Amber Rudd: Forgive me for making no comment about the appointment. I certainly share the hon. Lady’s view that prepayment meters need reform, that we need the safeguard tariff that the CMA has proposed and that it is unacceptable for the most vulnerable customers—usually those on the lowest incomes—to be stuck on higher tariffs. We will support the CMA to ensure that it delivers on that.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Cornwall produces the world’s finest china clay, but the industry faces a significant increase in its costs due to the proposed implementation of the EU emissions trading scheme. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government should do all they can to make sure British industry is not put at a competitive disadvantage as a result of energy costs, and will she meet me specifically to discuss what we can do to support the china clay industry?

Amber Rudd: I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend, who I know is a strong champion for the china clay industry in his constituency. The EU ETS provides an important role in levelling out competitiveness within the EU to make sure that our intensive industries are protected. I will meet him to ensure that his industry receives a fair settlement.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The Minister will be aware of the devastating Super Puma helicopter crash in Norway less than a fortnight ago, which killed 14 people, including Iain Stuart from Laurencekirk. Super Pumas have ditched in the North sea three times since 2009, citing problems such as gear box and oil pump failure. We do not yet know the cause of the crash on 29 April, but 14 families, including Mr Stuart’s, will be desperate know what it was. Will she engage with her counterparts in Norway to ensure that any lessons learned from their investigations can be applied to offshore commercial helicopter flights in the UK?

Andrea Leadsom: We were all completely devastated to hear about that crash. Having been on one of those helicopter trips to an offshore rig, I have seen the amount of effort and the focus there is on health and safety, and that makes it doubly tragic. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the UK Civil Aviation Authority has grounded the helicopter model involved. I assure him that we are working very closely with it and with colleagues in Norway to understand exactly what happened so that we can make sure that it cannot happen in the future.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that historic market towns built for the horse and cart, such as Bradford on Avon in my constituency, could not cope, because they do not have the infrastructure, with the extra traffic that fracking will bring?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely think that is one of the factors any local authority planning committee will take into account. That is precisely the point of having
local authority involvement and a community say, because local people of course know best what is suitable for their area. Local planning is one aspect of this, but the whole safety regulatory environment—the Health and Safety Executive and the Environment Agency—is, nevertheless, absolutely vital. I assure my hon. Friend that there will be no compromise either on safety or on the view of the local community.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will know that we now have scientific evidence that noxious fumes from diesel engines are poisoning our children and poisoning our air. Are those fumes also related to the deterioration in our climate?

Amber Rudd: I share the hon. Gentleman’s concerns about pollution and air quality. It is because of those concerns that this Government are so committed to delivering on the Climate Change Act 2008. It is absolutely clear that the problem also derives from the support for diesel. Basically, we have all been misled on diesel, and I hope we can look carefully at how to make sure—for example, by ensuring no defeat devices are installed—that that does not happen again. I will work closely with the Department for Transport to make sure we deliver on that.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware of the continuing speculation about the Hinkley Point C project. Will she reassure me that, in any assessment of it, the Government will bear it in mind that it could create 25,000 jobs in the south-west during the construction period? Those are the skilled jobs that this economy desperately needs.

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and for giving me the opportunity to say how much this Government support the Hinkley Point project. We are delighted to be able to say that we expect it to go ahead and to deliver much-needed clean, secure, affordable energy. This Government are focused on a new nuclear programme, not only with Hinkley Point but with other new nuclear, because we are doing what the Labour party so dismally failed to do for 13 years, namely deliver on investment in infrastructure to the benefit of all consumers.
EU Migrants: National Insurance Numbers

10.35 am

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) [Urgent Question]:
To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on the number of national insurance numbers issued to EU migrants.

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire):

For years, UK migration figures have been measured independently according to agreed United Nations definitions. Today’s report by the independent Office for National Statistics is a clear endorsement of the validity of those figures. I welcome the clarity that the ONS has provided on this important issue, and am glad to have the opportunity to clear up some of the misconceptions about the figures for national insurance numbers and what those may mean for EU migration.

On 7 March this year, the Office for National Statistics published a note explaining why long-term international immigration figures could differ from the number of national insurance number registrations, concluding that the two series are likely to differ. At the same time, the ONS undertook to conduct further analysis of the issue. It has published its conclusions this morning: I stress that that is independent work carried out by an independent statistics authority. Its conclusions are clear. The ONS has now stated that the difference between the number of long-term EU migrants and the number of national insurance registrations by EU nationals can largely be accounted for by short-term EU migration to the UK, and that the independent international passenger survey remains “the best source of information for measuring” net migration. The ONS also says that national insurance figures are “not a good measure” of levels of migration, even if they are helpful for understanding patterns of migration.

A national insurance number can be obtained by anyone working in the UK for just a few weeks, and the ONS explains clearly that the number of national insurance registrations should not be compared with migration figures because they measure entirely different things. Short-term migrants have never been included in the long-term migration statistics, which are governed by UN definitions. There have always been short-term migrants who are not picked up in those statistics, but short-term migration will not have an impact on population growth and population pressures, as by definition short-term migrants leave the UK within 12 months of arriving.

The Government look forward to the ONS’s follow-up note later in the year, which will set out its analysis in greater detail. We must now be careful not to distort the figures following the ONS’s clear statement. I welcome its conclusions, which I hope provide reassurance to those concerned that national insurance data could suggest that the published migration statistics were inaccurate.

The Government take very seriously the need to reduce net migration to long-term sustainable levels, from the hundreds of thousands to the tens of thousands. We have taken a number of steps to achieve that, of which the Immigration Bill, which completed its parliamentary passage this week, is just the latest. Clear and accurate statistics are integral to what we are seeking to achieve. I am pleased that today the ONS has, with its normal impartiality, confirmed that the statistics based on the international passenger survey that we use have the necessary integrity and remain the best measure for understanding net migration.

John Redwood: I am grateful to the Minister for his statement, but does he not accept that the very popular programme of making a substantial reduction in net migration that he, I and other Conservative MPs stood on at the general election is quite impossible to honour as a promise given the Government’s own figures for migration, never mind the figures for national insurance? Migration has been running well above the maximum total that we suggested to the electorate. Does that not show that all the time we stay in the European Union we cannot control EU migration in the way we promised at the general election? Does the big difference between the national insurance numbers and the migration figures have implications that will worry Members across the House, given the impact on public services?

Over five years, 1.2 million additional people came to the UK, got a job and a national insurance number, and lived here for a considerable time, even if some of them have now departed. Those people needed doctors surgeries, school places for their children, and so on. In the past two years, an additional 1.1 million people have registered for GP services. That implies that national insurance numbers are closer to the truth, and that we need to consider those figures as well as the formal migration numbers when planning public provision.

Does the Minister share my concern that we are not offering a sufficiently good welcome in terms of GP places, health facilities and school places, and that that is putting a lot of pressure on settled communities and not offering something good to the newcomers? Does he share my wish to get a grip on that, so that we can properly plan our public services? The note that was slipped out—fortunately Mr Speaker allowed this urgent question—does not explain that discrepancy or deal with the fundamental point that if someone comes here, works and gets a national insurance number, we must provide public facilities for them.

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for allowing me to clarify those points, and today’s statement from the ONS is clear. As Glen Watson, the deputy national statistician for population and public policy, said:

“We are confident the International Passenger Survey remains the best available way of measuring long-term migration to the UK.”

My right hon. Friend correctly highlighted the pressure on public services, and the Government remain committed to reducing net migration to the long-term sustainable levels that existed before the previous Labour Government. We remain focused on achieving that, which is why we have taken steps to reform the visa system and to confront illegal migration. Measures in the Immigration Bill, which the House approved earlier this week, are pivotal to that.

The ONS is clear that we should not be looking at national insurance numbers for an assessment of the pressures of migration. Some have suggested that leaving
the EU will in some way deal with the migration issue, but we need only consider the examples of other countries that have decided to be outside the EU yet have free movement, and pay into the EU budget. There is no idea that things would be better outside the EU, but I find it inconceivable that we would have access to the single market and not have those issues of free movement.

We must also stress the important achievements of the Prime Minister in his renegotiation, and in putting the welfare brake into effect and dealing with some of those pull factors, as well as important steps on deregulation. He secured important elements in that renegotiation for the benefit not just of the UK, but of the EU as a whole. We must grow that economy and see other European nations succeeding and creating jobs and employment in the way that this country has done. I recognise the concerns that my right hon. Friend has rightly highlighted about public services. Those issues remain a concern of this Government, but we have taken, are taking and will continue to take action to see net migration figures reduce to sustainable levels, and to address concerns about public services and the pressures on our communities.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Unlike my notorious predecessor in Wolverhampton South West, I see some positives to immigration. The right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) prays in aid the pressure on GPs—and there are pressures—but many GPs in the United Kingdom, particularly in areas such as mine, have trained overseas and are helping our constituents. The European Union brings us jobs, prosperity and environmental benefits through shared programmes, and it increases the sovereignty and security of our country. One in five carers looking after our growing older population have come to Britain from the EU and elsewhere, and it is currently estimated that 1.2 million UK citizens are taking advantage of the free movement of labour and are working or living overseas in the EU. It is a two-way process.

On the statement from the ONS, Glen Watson said this morning:

“National Insurance number registrations are not a good indicator of long-term international migration. This research shows that many people who register for National Insurance stay in the UK for less than a year, which is the minimum stay for a long-term migrant according to the internationally recognised definition.”

I am grateful to the Library for its helpful brief, dated 8 September 2015, in which it cites the HMRC national insurance manual, which says, among other things:

“Initially applicants need to make an application”—for a national insurance number—

“by phone...They may then be required to attend an interview at a DWP JobCentrePlus office, as HMRC’s guidance explains”.

It then goes on to cite the guidance. I suspect that, like me, the right hon. Member for Wokingham, when he turned 15, got his first job and had to go in person to apply for a national insurance number. He shakes his head. That is what I had to do and that was the general system then, but perhaps he did not start work at 15 in a factory, as I did. The Government should look again at the system, rather than simply mailing out national insurance numbers. I am not advocating a change; I am advocating that they look again at the desirability of the system of face-to-face interviews for everyone.

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman’s last point is obviously a matter for colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions, and clearly we continue to assess these matters, but his key point was about the long term versus the short term. The clear statements from the ONS highlight that the right measure to look at is the long-term immigration measure through the international passenger survey data. That is the clearest way to set out the pressures of migration. The ONS has also said very clearly that national insurance numbers are not an appropriate measure of assessment for that purpose. Yes, they indicate trends or patterns, but for overall net migration numbers the international passenger survey remains conclusively the best measure we have, and it is right that the Government use it, as we have been doing consistently, in line with the UN definitions for that mechanism. I note what he says and his endorsement of the ONS’s report this morning.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend seen the report by the London School of Economics this morning demonstrating that wages in this country have continued to rise strongly since the first flood of arrivals to this country from Poland and elsewhere, and that the fall in wages in recent years was plainly caused by the deep recession—the worst since the second world war—in 2007? This refutes other anti-immigrant arguments that some of the Brexiteers keep using in the present campaign. Does he accept that the real migrant crisis facing him and this country is the problem of how to deal, in a civilised and effective way, with the flood of people coming from war and anarchy in the middle east and north Africa, and that the problem is not Polish construction workers and Romanian nurses, who make a valuable contribution to the economic life of this country?

James Brokenshire: I must confess that I have not had the opportunity to see the LSE report to which my right hon. and learned Friend has referred, but I shall seek it out after I have left the Chamber. He clearly makes a strong point about the challenges we face in dealing with the migration crisis, and obviously the Government are taking clear steps, both in region and in Europe, to respond to and deal with that. On the issue of new EU members, the Government are clear on how we would use our veto if we were not satisfied with the terms on which a country was to join the EU—in terms of convergence with the economies of the EU and those issues, which we recognise, of free movement. We have that veto and will certainly use it, if we are not satisfied with the terms of entry.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. As I have myself been reminded, Members will, I am sure, have it in the forefront of their minds to refer to national insurance numbers in the context of this urgent question. That is at its heart, as I feel sure Dr Eilidh Whiteford is well aware.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I am indeed, Mr Speaker. I welcome the publication of the data this morning because it can only help to give us a better understanding of migration patterns, notwithstanding the fact that, on their own, I do not think that these national insurance registrations are a reliable indicator for measuring long-term international migration.
It is vital that we remember that migration is a global phenomenon, not just a European issue, and that it is very much a two-way street. In Scotland, we are all too aware that for generations migration has meant that many of our citizens have moved abroad. Even now, many of our most highly qualified young people leave to build careers in other parts of the world. I am also conscious that in some sectors of our economy we are heavily dependent on migrant labour, not least for our NHS, but for other parts of our public and private sectors. Migrant workers not only contribute to our economy, but help to anchor the jobs of the local workforce in the UK. What assessment have the Government made of the number of UK industries and UK jobs that depend on the free movement of labour within the EU? Will the Minister be forthright in dispelling myths about migration and in articulating the contribution that migrant workforces make to our economy?

James Brokenshire: As a Government, we have always been clear that we want to attract the skilled and the talented, the brightest and the best to contribute to the UK’s economic growth. We therefore have a very clear policy for visa nationals from outside the EU in response to that. When it comes to the EU, what we are more concerned about is the perhaps artificial draw that might come from benefits, and we also want to ensure that we have a skilled workforce in the UK to meet the needs of the economy. That explains the Government’s important work on apprenticeships through the apprenticeship levy and indeed the skills levy that we will introduce in respect of skill visas. We want to provide people from this country with the right skills to meet those needs so that we are not overly reliant on labour from outside the UK.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): The publication of the NI figures is simply one more confirmation that there is no chance—zero—of us fulfilling our promise to the British people to reduce immigration to the tens of thousands, unless there is a restriction on the free movement of labour within the European Union. The Minister mentioned the renegotiation, so will he tell us why the Government did not attempt in any way to get a reduction in that free movement as part of that renegotiation?

James Brokenshire: We remain focused on reducing net migration to those sustainable levels, and my right hon. Friend well knows that the renegotiation to which I referred brought about the welfare brake and indeed improved competitiveness across the UK by dealing with unnecessary bureaucracy. If we look at the differences between economies across the EU, we can see how that reformist agenda that the Prime Minister has championed is essential. As I have said, we are taking steps within the UK to ensure that we have the right skills for the UK workforce as well.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): There is nothing new in an influx of east Europeans. The displaced persons system that operated immediately after the end of the second world war helped millions of people from around Europe who were without jobs and without states. I worked with many east Europeans in the pits on the basis that they were members of our union, the National Union of Mineworkers, and got paid the same money as we did. They did not undermine other workers in the traditional industries and some of them were very involved in the trade union movement. Today, however, thousands and millions of people are on the move, but the Government cannot see the possibility of doing what we did in the late ’40s by insisting on union recognition, the same pay for everybody and no undermining of workers’ rights. The net result would be no problem at all, and UK Independence party’s rise would disappear like snowflakes on an oven.

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman has made his point in his customary colourful way, but the facts that we see before us show that national insurance numbers—which, after all, are what the urgent question was about—are not a good measure when it comes to the long-term issue of migration. The hon. Gentleman may be more interested in talking about snowflakes and union recognition, but I think that those are matters for another debate.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am not sure that I saw the Minister last night at the world premiere of “Brexit: The Movie”. Unfortunately, it is not a war film.

A few months ago, the Prime Minister was telling us that unless he got his way on migration, he would consider leaving the European Union. That involved a minor change in migration figures and controls. The Prime Minister now says that if we left the EU, there might indeed be a third world war. I have a graph here, so that Members can see the difference between the two figures. Does not that mismatch show that we have no idea of the net migration figure? Migration is out of control. We need to regain control of our borders, and that is what the Minister should have done by means of an emergency brake.

James Brokenshire: I was not at the opening night of “Brexit: The Movie” to discover whether my hon. Friend had a starring role in it, so we shall have to wait and see.

The Office for National Statistics makes very clear that, in its judgment, the passenger survey is still the right way of assessing net migration, and that is the measure that the Government will continue to use.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): I am very disappointed, because I came into the Chamber hoping to see conspiracy exposed over national insurance numbers, and there is no conspiracy. It has been a disappointing day.

James Brokenshire: I am always sorry to disappoint the hon. Gentleman. His disappointment is obviously a result of the clarity that the Office for National Statistics has provided.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I remind my right hon. Friend that the report produced by the Public Administration Committee during the last Parliament cast grave doubt on the accuracy and reliability of the immigration statistics? The annual passenger survey is just that: a survey of a sample of passengers entering the United Kingdom. Those statistics
may well be “the best way” of measuring our immigration, but the Committee decided that they were not a reliable way of measuring immigration, and the very large rise in national insurance numbers shows that there is something else going on.

May I also remind my right hon. Friend that the last census showed that the British population was larger by 467,000 than the Government had understood it to be, and that a very large proportion of that was due to unrecorded immigration? We do not have control over immigration into this country, because all EU citizens and their dependants have the right to come here, and the Government have no means of excluding them even if they are criminals and terrorists.

James Brokenshire: We do, in fact, exclude from the EU those who may be involved in criminality or terrorism, and the Prime Minister’s renegotiation has actually strengthened our ability to remove them. As for the annual passenger survey, the Office for National Statistics has made it very clear that it remains the best measure for determining net migration. The national insurance numbers do not provide such a measure. I am sure that the ONS, as an independent body, will continue to review the position and assess what improvement may be made, but today it has been specific in stating that the passenger survey is the most effective measure.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm that the number of Jobcentre Plus offices that are able to issue national insurance numbers has been reduced? I have been told of someone who applied in York, only to be told that they had to travel to Hull to get a national insurance number.

James Brokenshire: I will write to the hon. Lady, having consulted colleagues from the Department for Work and Pensions.

Mr Speaker: I call Sir Gerald Howarth. [Interruption.] I thought that the knight from Hampshire was standing. Never mind. We will hear from the hon. Gentleman on another occasion, I feel sure. I call Mr Damian Green.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): This is going to be a slightly different question from the one you were expecting, Mr Speaker. I am delighted that the Office for National Statistics has published this report to bust the myth that these national insurance numbers expose something about the immigration system. The report states explicitly that the main contributors to these national insurance numbers are people who are here for less than a year and will therefore not be included in the Government’s immigration targets and have nothing whatever to do with them. To be kind to those who are arguing the case for Brexit, I think they believe that short-term migrants are as bad as long-term migrants in many cases. That being the case, will the Minister acknowledge that many groups of short-term migrants—including 27,000 teachers, 28,000 care workers and 60,000 seasonal workers in the farming industry—do tremendous things for this country, both in our public services and in the private sector?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for making that clear point. He recognises, as I do, the benefit that we gain from the short-term migration of EU workers. Others who fall into that category include students on short-term courses, short-term contractors and, as he has pointed out, seasonal workers. The point is that this migration is short-term: these people leave and therefore do not contribute to the long-term pressures.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Is it not the case that national insurance numbers that have been issued are not subsequently removed? Has the Minister made an estimate of how many of the numbers relate to people who are no longer here? Will he also gently ask the Brexit campaign not to descend into dog-whistle politics over immigration?

James Brokenshire: It is important that we focus on the issues at hand this morning—namely, the national insurance numbers and the best measure for assessing long-term migration. That is what the Office for National Statistics has clearly set out, and that is the issue that we should focus on. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the national insurance number system, but clearly that is not the best mechanism for assessing the overall impact.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): These figures clearly lay bare the fact that the Government are powerless to control EU immigration for the benefit of our public services. How do the Government justify our present immigration system, which unfairly discriminates against economic migrants from outside the EU? Would it not be better, on leaving the EU, to design a fairer immigration policy with a level playing field for nationals of all countries, some of whom might be better qualified?

James Brokenshire: I will leave it to the hon. Gentleman to make the case for having a visa system for all EU nationals, which is what he appears to be suggesting. The Government have a clear approach to controlling migration from outside the EU through our skills-based visas and through other routes, as well as to dealing with the pressures that we have highlighted, with economic competitiveness and with draws such as the welfare system.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): With discrepancies of 1.2 million national insurance numbers being reported, and with EU immigration increasing, it has become harder to tell whether new arrivals will stay for just a few months or for more than a year. This means that passengers from the EU who want to live permanently in Britain might have been incorrectly designated as visitors. What has been done to ensure that people coming from the EU are correctly identified, particularly in these difficult times when accurate figures are vital and being transparent is key to creating trust among the British people?

James Brokenshire: I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point about the need for clarity and certainty in relation to the numbers. We have looked to the Office for National Statistics, which operates independently of me, of the Home Office and of other Government Departments, to give us that clarity. It has judged that the international passenger survey is the best and most appropriate measure for that, and it continues to review, as it does from time
to time, how best to ensure that it captures effective data from its interviews and how those data are extrapolated to produce its quarterly numbers.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I recognise what the Minister has said about the reliability of the national insurance figures as a measure of immigration, but he must accept that there is significant uncertainty and ambiguity in the perception of the complete picture. Given the significant pressure on public services, I urge the Minister to respond to those concerns and perhaps outline what he thinks could be done to provide a more balanced overall picture of immigration and to address the grave concerns out there.

James Brokenshire: Obviously, one of the key elements is that we need a strong economy to be able to support our public services. As for the pressures on particular communities, the Government are introducing a controlling migration fund to assist those that may be specifically affected by population increases linked to migration, and we will continue with reforms to control migration.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): The Minister knows that I represent a border constituency with a natural hinterland. I have constituents who cannot get national insurance numbers. They have worked in the south and are pensioned from the south, but they pay tax in the UK and have been issued with UK tax numbers under double taxation rules. However, they cannot get national insurance numbers. Can the Minister assure me that the sensitivity around the statistics and the nonsense about EU migrants are not factors in their predicament?

James Brokenshire: I will certainly ensure that his comments about people's ability to obtain national insurance numbers are passed on to colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions. I point the hon. Gentleman to the ONS's clear statement on the lack of a connection between national insurance numbers and long-term migration and to what I have already indicated about the best measures.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is quite clear from the Minister's answer to the urgent question that there are more EU migrants here at any one time than was previously thought. That is now not in doubt. I suspect that the Minister is a good poker player, because he can clearly bluff and misrepresent the facts.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would not wish to suggest that a Minister had misrepresented someone else.

Mr Bone: Indeed, Mr Speaker. What I was trying to say, clearly rather clumsily, was that the Minister would be a very good poker player. He is an excellent Minister, and I want to give him some career guidance. The Prime Minister clearly requires that immigration numbers come down to the tens of thousands, but these NI numbers prove that that cannot possibly happen while we are in the EU, so could he advise the Prime Minister to change his position on the EU and recommend that people vote to come out, and the Minister can keep his job?

James Brokenshire: I am always grateful for advice from my hon. Friend on a range of issues, but I am sorry to disappoint him that we differ in our positions on the EU. The UK will be stronger, more secure and better off by remaining in the EU.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My hon. Friend has given an exposition of the position. However, there is clearly large-scale EU migration to this country by people who want to work, and our public services and many of our service industries depend on those people coming to do those jobs. In my constituency, the number of EU nationals has grown from 1,000 in 2010 to 10,000 in just five years. It cannot be said that that is not a long-term trend, because it clearly is. At the same time, when it comes to people from the Commonwealth, some of my constituents cannot get their relatives in and businesses cannot get skilled people in to do jobs that are required.

James Brokenshire: Clearly, the net migration statistics show the challenges that remain in relation to both EU and non-EU migration, and how those numbers continue to be much higher than we want them to be. That is why we continue on our reform agenda. On visas from outside the EU, we have the shortage occupation list to prioritise those skills that are particularly needed, so that visas can be granted where there are gaps.

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): The statistics published today show that the number of national insurance numbers has risen exponentially since 2003, from just over 100,000 to 700,000. I do not believe that what the Minister has said about the data clarifying the issue is the case, because there is a variation in the estimate for the short-term element of more than 200,000. The Government think that, over the next 14 years, 3 million more people will come here from the EU to settle on a long-term basis—at current rates, the figure will be 5 million. This has a tremendous impact in every constituency, including mine, on housing, jobs and services. I just ask: do the Government not care about that?

Mr Speaker: Order. May I gently point out that listening to and observing our proceedings today are quite a large number of schoolchildren? If they asked questions in class that are as long as the questions we are getting today, they would probably be put in detention.

James Brokenshire: I certainly would not want to end up in detention, so I shall try to be as brief as I can in my answer. Let me direct my hon. Friend to the report, as it says that short-term migration to the UK “largely accounts for the recent differences” on the number of long-term migrants and that the international passenger survey is the “best source of information”. Clearly, we care about pressure on public services, which is why I have consistently made the point during this urgent question about the continued reforms that the Government are making to control migration.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): That last question warranted not a detention but a gold star. I am a great believer that the waves of migration that our country has had have been unbelievably beneficial for the country I am proud to represent in this place. However, I am
disappointed with the Government, because on 10 March I asked for these numbers to be released and yet for some reason, through the cloak and daggers and smoke-filled rooms behind different Ministries, these supposedly benign figures could not be released at that point. Why was that?

James Brokenshire: A clear amount of detailed work has been conducted by the ONS to produce today's report, drawing together different information from the Department for Work and Pensions, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and its own assessment. I hope my hon. Friend will recognise that the report comes independently from the ONS, in order to give that assurance and clarity, which I think it does give.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Is the IPS not, by definition, random and self-selecting? Is not the best way to measure the number of people in this country to ensure that passports or identity cards are swiped on the way in and on exiting it?

James Brokenshire: The ONS clearly says that the IPS is the best measure available to assess our long-term net migration numbers. We will continue to see how issues such as the availability of exit check data may help to enrich and support the ONS's analysis, but its report's conclusions today make it clear that the IPS remains the best measure.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): National insurance numbers are obtained only by those who want to work legally and pay their tax or claim benefits. Inevitably, some EU nationals will be in the UK working illegally. What assessment has the Minister made of the number of EU nationals working cash in hand without a national insurance number, taking the jobs of our constituents? What is he doing to prevent illegal working by EU nationals?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes an important point about illegal working. It is why the new Immigration Bill, which we have been debating this week, includes new measures to target those engaging workers who do not have those rights to be here. Indeed, we will continue to work across government with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Department for Work and Pensions to better identify those who are not complying with the rules and to take firm action against them.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What assessment have Ministers made of future EU enlargement on these statistics in the years ahead, particularly given that those Ministers support Turkish accession?

James Brokenshire: There is no prospect of Turkey joining the EU any time soon. It needs to undertake significant steps as part of reform of a range of different elements, so that issue is not relevant to this. Again, let me underline how the Government will use their veto against any new country seeking to join the EU if they are not satisfied with the terms of that, particularly in relation to convergence and the impact that that would have on labour markets across the EU.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): In my constituency, Boston has seen the highest level of eastern European migration anywhere in the UK, driven largely by seasonal work. I agree with the Minister that NI numbers would be a terrible way of measuring migration in an area such as mine, but does he agree that, in areas that have seen unusual concentrations of migration, we do need a better way of measuring migration if we are adequately able to plan for public services?

James Brokenshire: Although I entirely recognise the point that my hon. Friend makes about the particular pressures that certain areas in the UK have experienced as a consequence of migration, I also recognise the benefits that are attached in terms of the contribution to our economy. It is why we are seeking to introduce the controlling migration fund, which will assist areas that are experiencing that growth in population linked to migration.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): The Government's case rests on ignoring the arguments set out by my right hon. Friend the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions earlier this week, particularly in relation to people Shuttling to and fro for a few months at a time. That is a problem that the Minister's case would ignore by looking at the passenger service. If he will not listen to my right hon. Friend, will he at least listen to Lord Rose, the chairman of the pro-EU Britain Stronger in Europe campaign, who told the Treasury Committee that the wages of the lowest paid would rise if we left the EU and took control of migration?

James Brokenshire: I point my hon. Friend not only to the contribution that those who arrive here make to our economy—it is a net contribution of around £2.5 billion—and how important it is for our economy, but to the steps that we are taking to reduce those artificial pull factors. We need to focus not just on those pressures in our local areas, but on how we get the right skills for our economy to ensure that we are giving young people in this country the best opportunity, which is precisely what our apprenticeships programme is all about.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Minister has sought to defend the Government's position by continually referring to short-term workers, but will he acknowledge that short-term workers are replaced by further short-term workers, and therefore the pressure on our public services is continuous, as are the diminished opportunities for UK citizens to get those jobs.

James Brokenshire: Assessing the pressure on the population is about long-term net migration. That is the clear measure that we use, and that is the UN definition. It remains absolutely the appropriate way to assess those issues in respect of the potential growth in population and it is why we do remain focused on the measure that the ONS has clearly set out today, which is the passenger survey, and that assessment of long-term net migration.
The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): With permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to make a statement.

The Government are today laying before Parliament and depositing in the Libraries of both Houses a White Paper on the BBC charter review. The royal charter is the constitutional basis for the BBC. It is the framework for the way in which the BBC is governed and guarantees its independence. The current royal charter will expire at the end of 2016; today we lay out our plans for the next one.

The White Paper represents the culmination of 10 months’ work. I thank everyone who contributed to the Green Paper consultation process, not least 190,000 members of the public. I am also very grateful to Sir David Clementi and his team for their independent review of the governance and regulation of the BBC, to the Committees in both Houses that made recommendations and to all the stakeholders, BBC representatives and others who helped inform our deliberations.

The BBC is one of the country’s greatest institutions, and 80% of those who responded to our Green Paper said the BBC serves audiences very well or well. Every week the BBC reaches 97% of the UK population and 348 million people across the globe, informing, educating and entertaining them and promoting Britain around the world.

It is our overriding aim to ensure that the BBC continues to thrive in a media landscape that has changed beyond recognition since the last charter review 10 years ago and that it continues to deliver the best possible service for licence fee payers. So today we are setting out a framework for the BBC that allows it to focus on high-quality, distinctive content that informs, educates and entertains while serving all audiences; enhances its independence while making it much more effective and accountable in its governance and regulation; makes support for the UK’s creative industries central to the BBC’s operations while minimising any undue negative market impacts; increases the BBC’s efficiency and transparency; and supports the BBC with a modern, sustainable and fair system of funding.

The BBC’s special public service ethos and funding allow it to take creative risks, to be innovative, and to produce high-quality content. That means more choice for listeners and viewers. The BBC delivers a huge amount of outstanding programming, including in drama, news and current affairs, sport, science and the arts. Many programmes have received awards, not least at the BAFTAs on Sunday, and they demonstrate that, at its best, the BBC is still the finest broadcaster in the world. However, as the BBC Trust itself has recognised, and in some areas the BBC needs to be more ambitious, particularly in its more mainstream television, radio and online services.

The BBC director-general has called for a BBC that is “more distinctive than ever—and clearly distinguishable from the market”.

The Government are emphatically not saying that the BBC should not be popular. Indeed, some of its most distinctive programmes, such as “Life on Earth”, “Wonders of the Universe” and “Strictly Come Dancing” on TV, or the “Newsbeat” programme or Jeremy Vine show on Radio 1 and 2 respectively, have very wide audiences because they are so good.

With a 33% share in television, 53% share in radio and the third most popular UK website, and with only 27% of people believing that the BBC makes lots of programmes that are more daring and innovative than those of other broadcasters, commissioning editors should ask consistently of new programming, “Is this idea sufficiently innovative and high quality?” rather than simply, “How will it do in the ratings?” So we will place a requirement to provide distinctive content and services at the heart of the BBC’s overall core mission of informing, educating and entertaining in the public interest, and we will also affirm the need for impartiality in its news and current affairs broadcasts.

The BBC’s existing minimum content requirements will be replaced with a new licensing regime that will ensure its services are clearly differentiated from the rest of the market, enhancing choice for licence fee payers and backed up by robust incentive structures. The BBC will also be required to give greater focus to under-served audiences, in particular those from black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds and from the nations and regions, who are currently less well served. That will involve the BBC building on its new diversity strategy, maintaining out-of-London production quotas, and ensuring that it continues to provide for minority languages in its partnerships with S4C and MG Alba.

Over the next charter period, we want the BBC to be the leading broadcaster in addressing issues of diversity. For the first time, diversity will be enshrined in the new charter’s public purposes. This, along with a commitment to serve all audiences in the BBC’s mission, will help hold the BBC to account for delivering for everyone in the UK.

Looking beyond these shores, the BBC World Service is rightly considered across the globe to be a beacon of impartial and objective news. It is a vital corrective to the state-run propaganda of certain other countries. So we will protect its annual funding of £254 million for five years and also make available £289 million of additional Government funding over the spending review period, as announced by the Chancellor last year, so that the World Service can represent the UK and its values around the globe.

All organisations need a governance and regulatory structure that is fit for purpose. The BBC’s is not, and it is no longer supportable for the BBC to regulate itself. Governance failures, including excessive severance payments and the costly digital media initiative, have illustrated that the division of responsibilities between the BBC executive and the BBC Trust is confusing and ineffective. As the independent review led by Sir David Clementi made clear, there is widespread agreement that reform is necessary.

The new charter will create a unitary board for the BBC that has a much clearer separation of governance and regulation. The board will be responsible for ensuring that the BBC’s strategy, activity and output are in the public interest and accord with the missions and purposes set out in the charter. Editorial decisions will remain the responsibility of the director-general and his editorial independence will be explicitly enshrined in the Charter, while the unitary board will consider any issues or
complaints that arise post-transmission. For the first time, the 
BBC will have the ability to appoint a majority of its board independently of Government. This is a major change, as previously there were 22 BBC governors, and then the members of the BBC Trust, were all appointed by Government.

Ofcom has a proven track record as a regulator of media and telecoms. It is the right body to take on external regulation of the BBC. We will require Ofcom to establish new operating licences for the BBC, with powers to ensure that its findings are acted upon. Ofcom will also take charge of regulating the distribution framework and fair trading arrangements for the BBC. It will be a strong regulator to match a strong BBC.

The Government will introduce four further changes to make the BBC more accountable to those it serves. The charter review process will be separated from the political cycle by establishing an 11-year charter to 2027, with an opportunity to check that the reforms are working as we intend at the mid-term. This will be the third longest charter in the BBC’s history, and allows for an orderly transition to the new arrangements. The BBC will become more accountable to the devolved nations; the complaints system will undergo long overdue reform; and new expectations will be set for public engagement and responsiveness. These are major changes to the way in which the BBC is governed. They will take time to effect and it is important that this process runs smoothly, so the current BBC chair, Rona Fairhead, will remain in post for the duration of her current term, which ends in October 2018.

The creative sector is one of this country’s great success stories, growing at twice the rate of the rest of the economy since 2008 and accounting for £84 billion of gross value added and nearly 9% of service exports. The BBC should be at the core of the creative sector, supporting everyone from established players to SMEs. It is already a major purchaser, spending more than £1 billion on the services of around 2,700 suppliers involved in making programmes for the BBC.

The BBC already allows up to 50% of its content to be competed for by the independent sector. The Government now intend that the remaining 50% in-house guarantee for television should be removed for all BBC content except news and related current affairs output. Unless there is clear evidence that it would not provide value for money, all productions will be tendered. There will be a phased introduction of this requirement, which will open up hundreds of millions of pounds of production expenditure to competition. Not only will this benefit the creative industries, but it is fundamentally a good thing for viewers and listeners, with BBC commissioning editors given greater freedom to pick the most creative ideas and broadcast the highest quality programmes.

The BBC plans to make its in-house production unit a commercial subsidiary. We support these plans in principle, provided they meet the necessary regulatory approvals. However, the BBC can, by virtue of its size and scale, have a negative impact on the media market, crowding out investment and deterring new entrants, so Ofcom will be given the power to assess all aspects of BBC services to see how they impact on the market, with proportionate powers to sanction. Rather than seeing other players as rivals, the BBC should proactively seek to enhance, bolster and work in partnership with the wider broadcasting and creative industries. There will be a focus on that in the new charter. In particular, the BBC will support and invigorate local democracy across the UK, working with local news outlets.

The Government will also consult in the autumn on a new contestable public service content fund that will allow other broadcasters and producers to make more public service content in areas that are currently underserved, such as programmes for children and for black, Asian and minority ethnic audiences. It will be worth £20 million a year, and it will be paid for from unallocated funding from the 2010 licence fee agreement. There will be more transparency in the way the BBC promotes its own services, and a requirement to steer such activity towards areas of high public value. The BBC will be expected to share its content as widely as possible, and it will also be encouraged further to open up its archive so that other organisations and the public can enjoy its many treasures.

The BBC belongs to all of us. Making its archive more widely available is just one part of a broader opening up process. We want the BBC to be much more transparent, in particular about efficiency improvements. The BBC already plans to make £1.5 billion of savings by the end of this charter period, and the BBC Trust has driven some improvements in transparency, but the BBC needs to become more accountable to those it serves. Only 23% of the public believe that the BBC is efficient. Licence fee payers need the BBC to spend the nearly £4 billion they give it every year more wisely. The National Audit Office, which has an outstanding track record, will therefore become the financial auditor of the BBC and will have the power to conduct value for money investigations of the BBC’s activities, with appropriate safeguards for editorial matters. The BBC will also be required to ensure that it is transparent and efficient in its spending by reporting expenditure by genre.

The BBC already publishes data on the salaries of its staff by broad bands, and the names and detailed remuneration packages of those in management earning more than £150,000. The public have a right to know what the highest earners the BBC employs are paid out of their licence fee. The new charter will therefore require the BBC to go further regarding the transparency of what it pays its talent and publish the names of all its employees and freelancers who earn above £450,000—the current director-general’s salary—in broad bands. The Government also expect the new BBC board to consider other ways in which it can improve transparency of talent pay. The BBC will also be required to undertake a root-and-branch review of its research and development activity, laying out its objectives for the future.

Finally, the BBC needs a fair, accountable and sustainable funding system that is fit for the future. There is no perfect model for funding the BBC but, given the stability it provides and the lack of clear public support for any alternative model, the licence fee remains the most appropriate funding model for the next charter period. The licence fee has been frozen at £145.50 since 2010. We will end the freeze and increase the licence fee in line with inflation to 2021-22, at which point there will be a new settlement. In line with the other reforms to funding announced last July, this means that the BBC will have a flat cash settlement to 2021-22. This gives it the certainty and funding levels it needs to deliver its updated
mission and purposes, and it will ensure that the BBC remains one of the best-funded public service broadcasters in the world, receiving more than £18 billion from 2017-18 to 2021-22.

Future funding settlements will be made using a new regularised process every five years, giving the BBC greater independence from Government. The licence fee concession for the over-75s will be protected during this Parliament, although voluntary payments will be allowed. We will give the BBC more freedom to manage its budgets. Protected funding of £150 million a year for broadband and £5 million a year for local television will be phased out. The World Service will be an exception to this, given its enormously important role.

The current licence fee system needs to be fairer, so we will close the iPlayer loophole, meaning that those who watch BBC programmes on demand will now need a TV licence like everyone else. There will be pilots of a more flexible payment system to benefit those on lower incomes and make it fairer for everyone. At the moment, people have to pay for the first year in only six months, meaning six much higher monthly payments. We will take forward many of the recommendations from David Perry QC’s review to make the process of investigating and prosecuting licence fee evasion more effective and fair.

Although the licence fee remains the best way of funding the BBC for this charter period, it is likely to become less sustainable as the media landscape continues to evolve. The Government therefore welcome the BBC’s intention to explore whether additional revenue could be raised at home and abroad from additional subscription services sitting alongside the core universal fee.

The Government are clear that any new subscription offer would be for additional services beyond what the BBC already offers. It will be for the BBC to set the scope of these plans, but we expect it to review progress and success in order to feed into the next charter review process. We would also like to see BBC content become portable, so that licence fee payers have access when travelling abroad.

The BBC is, and must always remain, at the very heart of British life. We want the BBC to thrive, to make fantastic programmes for audiences and to act as an engine for growth and creativity. Our reforms give the BBC much greater independence from Government—in editorial matters, in its governance, in setting budgets and through a longer charter period. They secure the funding of the BBC and will help the BBC to develop new funding models for the future.

At the same time, these reforms will assist the BBC to fulfil its own stated desire to become more distinctive and better to reflect the diverse nature of its audience. They place the BBC at the heart of the creative industries—as a partner of the local and commercial sectors, not a rival. The BBC will operate in a more robust and more clearly defined governance and regulatory framework. It will be more transparent and accountable to the public it serves, who rely on the BBC to be the very best it can possibly be so that it can inform, educate and entertain for many years to come. I commend this statement to the House.

11.36 am

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): May I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for early sight of it? Despite being very coy in the House yesterday when we asked about his plans, he seems to have managed to brief various newspapers overnight on a large part of the contents of the White Paper—a deplorable state of affairs. Indeed, for the last few weeks, we have had to read an increasing avalanche of briefing to Conservative-supporting newspapers—especially those hostile to the BBC—which appears to have emanated from his Department.

The fact that most of the Secretary of State’s wilder proposals appear to have been watered down, dumped or delayed by the Government, of which he is a member, is a reflection of his diminishing influence and lack of clout. He has not got his way in most things, and I welcome that.

There is no point the Secretary of State denying that he has been overruled by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. We know he is extremely hostile to the BBC. He wants it diminished in scope and size. He recently told an audience in Cambridge that the BBC is merely “a market intervention of around £4 billion by government”.

That was before he described the disappearance of the BBC if the charter was not renewed as “a tempting prospect”.

The Secretary of State has spent time in speeches trying to tell the BBC that it should not be making popular programmes or that, if it does, they should be scheduled at times when fewer people will watch them. The truth is that, in large part, he has not got his way. [Interruption.] The Secretary of State’s views are also totally out of step with licence fee payers, who value and support the BBC. I said yesterday that the Opposition believe the BBC charter should have governance arrangements that guarantee the BBC’s editorial and financial independence and refrain from interfering with the BBC’s mission to inform, educate and entertain us all. We will examine the White Paper in detail to see how well it measures up against those criteria.

I welcome the fact that the length of the new charter is to be 11 years, but I am concerned with the imposition of a break clause that will, in effect, reduce that to five and a half years. That does not really give the BBC the certainty and stability it requires to get on with the job.

I also welcome the fact that the licence fee is to continue until 2022, increased by CPI inflation, but we wait to see how his proposals over the second half of the charter period develop and will look very closely at what the Government do at that stage.

I still have some major concerns. On governance, I said yesterday that it is unacceptable for a majority of the unitary board, which will have major influence over output and therefore over editorial decisions, to be appointed by the Government. Today we learned that the Secretary of State plans that only up to at least half the board will be Government appointees. This board will run the BBC. Despite what he says, it will have influence over output and therefore over editorial decisions.
Appointing a unitary board is different from appointing either governors or trustees, who have had no power to run the BBC day to day.

The Secretary of State’s suggestion that these proposals enhance the independence of the BBC are hard to reconcile with reality. We have seen overnight a political campaign—the leave campaign—headed up by Cabinet Ministers threatening a broadcaster with unspecified consequences for doing something that Cabinet Ministers did not like. How much more serious a threat would that be if those Cabinet Ministers got to appoint at least half the board of the broadcaster concerned? Yet that is the prospect facing the BBC under his plans.

I am still worried, therefore, that the Government are seeking unduly to influence the output and editorial decision making of the BBC—or can be seen to be doing so. Will he now promise that all Government appointments will be made by a demonstrably independent process, overseen by the Commissioner for Public Appointments, that prevents there being any suspicion that the Government seek to turn the BBC into something over which they have more control than is currently the case? Reports in today’s newspapers that the Prime Minister has personally intervened to insist that Rona Fairhead be installed as chair of the new board do not augur well in this respect. I make no comment on the merits of Rona Fairhead, but there has been no process at all to reach such a decision—simply a prime ministerial diktat. That does not augur well for these arrangements in future.

On financial independence, a funding agreement was struck by the Chancellor with the BBC last year. We will look to ensure that it is met in full by the Government, with no more top-slicing—I welcome what the Secretary of State said about that—and no siphoning off of licence fee payers’ money into funds to be given to other broadcasters. We are glad, in that respect, that his contestable pot proposals, widely briefed in advance of the publication of the White Paper, are now somewhat shrunken and are to be consulted on. Will he give the House an assurance that he will listen to the results of that consultation and be prepared, if necessary and if that is its outcome, to abandon these proposals?

I am very concerned that the Secretary of State wants to change the mission of the BBC when it has worked well for more than 90 years and is supported by the public. There is a great virtue to the simplicity and clarity of the current phraseology of its mission statement. Given what he has said, we will look closely at what he proposes to see how it might work. I do not believe that his obsession with distinctiveness should be imported into the BBC’s mission statement. However, we will look at the wording he proposes to see whether we have any concerns about what the implications will be.

I welcome the Secretary of State’s focus on improving the diversity of the BBC in respect of its staffing and the way in which it produces its output. Again, I am not convinced that the mission statement is the best place to put the emphasis to the less, we will look closely at what he proposes, and I welcome the general tenor of his remarks and his intentions in this respect.

The Opposition do not accept the Secretary of State’s assertion that the size and scale of the BBC crowd out investment and have a negative impact on the media market—quite the opposite. The BBC already works well with other UK creative industries and other broadcasters, to the benefit of all. He might be better advised to keep his nose out of this rather than trying to tell the BBC how to do the job that it does on a day-to-day basis. He ought to stop his ideologically driven meddling and let it get on with the job.

We note what the Secretary of State had to say about the new and enhanced role that Ofcom will have in regulating the BBC. It will be a big job, and Ofcom already has a lot on its plate. Can he guarantee to the House that Ofcom will be given the proper resource—extra staffing, expertise and money—to do the job he now expects it to do? He said nothing about that in his statement today, but an important part of whether this will work is how Ofcom will be able to do this job.

In respect of what the Secretary of State said about the National Audit Office, I respect the National Audit Office and its work very much—I think everybody in this House does—so I have no objection. I note that he said in his statement that there will be appropriate safeguards for editorial independence once value-for-money reports have been done. That is tremendously important. It needs to be totally clear that any work done by the National Audit Office does not interfere with the editorial independence of the BBC. We will look at the detail of those safeguards, and I hope that he will be very open in setting out that detail.

The BBC is one of the UK’s most successful and loved institutions. There has developed a feeling, both inside this Parliament and outside it, that the Government are seeking inappropriate influence over the BBC. Will he now agree that when his proposals are debated in both Houses of Parliament, it should be on a substantive motion that enables Members of both Houses to express their views by way of a vote?

Mr Whittingdale: I have some sympathy for the hon. Lady. She had a dry run at this yesterday and rehearsed all her lines of attack, only to wake up this morning to discover that all the concerns that she had expressed were based on ill-founded, hysterical speculation by left-wing luvvies and others; and that, in actual fact, what the Government have proposed has been widely welcomed by, among others, the BBC. She said yesterday that she would judge the Government’s proposals on three key tests. She said that the charter “must guarantee the BBC’s financial and editorial independence, and it must help it to fulfil its mission to inform, educate and entertain us all.”—[Official Report, 11 May 2016; Vol. 609, c. 629.]

I can tell her that the White Paper not only meets those three tests, but exceeds them. That is exactly what we intend to do.

The hon. Lady raised some questions of detail. I accept that they are important, and I am very happy to give her the answers. I am grateful for her welcome for the fact that, for the first time, the length of the charter will be 11 years, which will take it out of the political electoral cycle. The mid-term review is not a mini charter review. It is simply a health check to allow the Government to ensure that the reforms that we are putting in place, which are substantial, are working properly. It would be ridiculous to find that they were not working and to be unable to do anything about it for another 11 years.

On governance, this is the first time the BBC board—the body that has overall responsibility for running the BBC—will have at least half, and possibly more than half, of its members appointed independently by the
BBC. Throughout the period for which the Labour party was in government, the appointments were made wholly by the Government, without even the public appointments process. The appointments that the Government will make are to six positions. They will be subject to the public appointments process, so they will involve the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. Three of them will be made in consultation with the devolved Administrations of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It will be for the BBC to decide how many other board members there should be, ranging from six to perhaps eight, and who should be chosen to do that.

The other point I would make to the hon. Lady—I set it out very clearly in my statement—is that the board will have no involvement in editorial decision making. The director-general remains the editor in chief, and he is responsible for editorial matters. The board’s involvement will be only after transmission; it will not influence editorial content.

These are substantial changes and we think it right that the existing chairman should continue in post to oversee the transition to the new arrangement. She will be in post until October 2018. She was of course appointed through the public appointments process.

I can confirm that the funding agreement will be met in full. There will be no top-slicing and we will not raid it for any other purposes, as her Government did when she was in office. The contestable pot is outside the July licence fee funding settlement. It is intended to provide additional opportunities for production companies that aim specifically to serve children’s audiences or black, Asian and minority ethnic audiences. We will do more on that to see how it will work.

The hon. Lady said that we have somehow complicated the original trinity, but I would point out to her that the mission statement does not include the simple Reithian trinity that is so often quoted. The current BBC charter mentions

“the promotion of its Public Purposes through the provision of output which consists of information, education and entertainment”.

That is not quite as snappy as the original “inform, educate and entertain”. All we have done is to make it more succinct by saying that those three objectives should be delivered by producing “high quality distinctive content” and “impartial news”. I would just ask her whether she disagrees with either of those two provisions: does she think that the BBC should not make distinctive programming or should not be impartial?

The hon. Lady’s concerns about Ofcom are perfectly justified. She is right that Ofcom will need resourcing to enable it to undertake its considerable new responsibilities. However, the BBC Trust is paid for out of the licence fee at the moment, and it is certainly our hope that the regulatory cost of overseeing the BBC, once Ofcom takes it over, will be lower than the existing cost of the BBC Trust. Ofcom will be financed from the licence fee, just as the BBC Trust is at present.

I confirm that it will be made explicit—there is no disagreement between the National Audit Office and the BBC about this—that the NAO will not involve itself in editorial matters.

I finish by saying that the hon. Lady has made the best fist she can of saying that the White Paper somehow threatens the BBC, but it does not. I end simply by telling her what the chairman of the BBC Trust said this morning:

“Constructive engagement between the Government, the BBC and the public has delivered a White Paper that sets good principles, strengthens the BBC’s governance and regulation and cements a financial settlement that will sustain the strong BBC that is loved...by the public.”

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I would point out that the opening exchanges between the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State have absorbed no fewer than 33 minutes, so I look first to the author of the textbook on brevity, from whom other right hon. and hon. Members should take their cue, Mr John Redwood.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State include in the charter a requirement that the BBC should recognise England as a nation, just as it recognises Scotland as a nation?

Mr Whittingdale: The BBC will have a duty to serve all the nations and regions, which of course includes England. Of the six appointees appointed by the Government under the public appointments process, four are non-executive directors who will each have the additional responsibility of representing one of the nations of the UK. There will therefore be a non-executive director who has the additional responsibility of representing the interests of English licence fee payers.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I too thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

The Scottish National party strongly supports public service broadcasting. We want to ensure that the BBC continues to provide distinctive, high-quality output. The charter renewal process provides an opportunity to celebrate the BBC’s many successes, and to reflect as a critical friend on ways in which it can improve. Although we have had our disagreements with the BBC, at its best it is unsurpassed.

There are a number of welcome proposals in the White Paper. It is right to break the link between the electoral cycle and the length of the charter. We also welcome the abolition of the BBC Trust and its replacement by a unitary board. It is vital that that board is as diverse as possible, with representation from the nations and, crucially, more BME representation, as we all agreed in a recent debate in this House. Those were also the conclusions of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, with its admirable Chair, the Member who I think represents Hertford and South Hertfordshire.

We are pleased that some of the more outlandish notions floated by the Government through the press appear to have been quietly parked. The Secretary of State gave us notice yesterday that one of the most risible, namely that the BBC might be prevented from scheduling popular programmes against ITV’s popular programmes, has died a quiet death. I notice, too, that the proposal to publish the salaries of all talent has been abandoned—although we will learn
who is on £450,000 a year or more, we will not now learn who is struggling by on £200,000 or £300,000 a year.

We have long argued that charter renewal is an opportunity for the BBC to be bolder in Scotland, to meet the needs and reflect the lives of Scottish audiences. Like the director-general, we want to see the production sector in Scotland grow. We welcome ongoing commitment to the Gaelic-language MG Alba. We also want meaningful editorial and financial control to rest in Scotland. To the BBC, we want a “Scottish Six” to replace the current overly parochial offering. We are pleased that the BBC agrees and is currently secretly piloting alternatives.

The BBC is sadly less trusted in Scotland than in any of the other constituent countries of the United Kingdom—[Interruption.] If hon. Members want to intervene, I am more than happy—[Interruption.] Oh, they cannot. Come up to me afterwards and I will answer the point. The BBC’s staff deserve better, and Scotland deserves better. The Secretary of State tells us today that he agrees, calling audiences in the nations under-served. He is preaching to the choir on the SNP Benches.

I hope that the White Paper is a milestone, allowing the BBC to learn from its mistakes, listen to its audiences and build on its proudest traditions.

Mr Whittingdale: The hon. Gentleman has an expert knowledge of the workings of the BBC. I welcome the fact that he is able to support a number of the proposals set out in the White Paper. He referred to a couple of things that were not in it, such as a proposal that the BBC should not schedule popular programmes against ITV’s popular programmes. I have said until I am blue in the face that the Government do not wish—and should not— to tell the BBC when to schedule programmes. The fact that that proposal does not appear in the White Paper should not therefore come as a great surprise to him.

Our intention is for the BBC to publish the salaries of talent earning more than £450,000, but we hope that the BBC will go further in due course, so as to obtain greater transparency on salaries. We will continue to talk to the BBC about that.

The hon. Gentleman raised specific points about the BBC’s need to serve the nations, and Scotland in particular. There are two elements in the White Paper that we believe will make a significant difference. The first is the confirmation that one of the members of the board will be there to act as a voice for Scotland, as well as bringing additional skills. Secondly, there will be a specific service licence for Scotland, which Ofcom will issue, as it will for the other nations of the UK; that will set out the expectations of how the BBC will go about meeting that requirement.

The hon. Gentleman may be aware that the BBC sent a letter this morning to the Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs in the Scottish Government, whom I spoke to yesterday afternoon. It set out some of its proposals in more detail. A lot of this is a matter for the BBC rather than the Government, but the letter stated that in the next charter period the BBC will continue its commitment “to spend network television production roughly in line with the population size of each nation.”

Other issues that the hon. Gentleman has raised are more a matter for the BBC, and I am sure that he will wish to discuss them with it.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): The Secretary of State will recall that I was one of those who came to the Chamber yesterday with a certain amount of concern about his views on the independence and quality of the BBC, but he was able to reassure me. Does he share at least a little of my sympathy for the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), because every fox that she expected to see running appears to have been shot, and the hounds that she expected to release appear to be running around in some confusion? Does he have any idea where all the rumours that caused so much alarm before this statement came from?

Mr Whittingdale: My right hon. and learned Friend is right. I have always voted in favour of the preservation of foxhunting, and we have done a lot of fox shooting this morning. The independence of the BBC—particularly its editorial independence—has always been at its heart, and that is one of the reasons it is so trusted around the world. It has always been our intention not to diminish that but to strengthen it, which is what I believe the White Paper delivers. I previously quoted the chairman of the BBC Trust welcoming the proposals in the White Paper, and I understand that the director general has now put out a statement:

“This white paper delivers a mandate for the strong, creative BBC the public believe in.”

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for those aspects of the statement that will promote a common cultural identity, which is so crucial for a healthy democracy. However, democracies also work because they have great organisations that are powerful in their own right and not directly accountable to the Government. Of almost 70 paragraphs in his statement, only one was given over to the governance of the board. Will he confirm what I thought he said in his original statement and an earlier answer, which is that if the board wishes to have eight members, the Government’s membership will be only four, and the Commissioner for Public Appointments will steer those?

Mr Whittingdale: No, that is not quite correct. Six members of the board—the chairman, the deputy chairman, and one non-executive director from each of the four nations of the UK—will be appointed by the Government, using the public appointments process, but the size of the board will be for the BBC to decide. Our proposals exactly match the recommendations of Sir David Clementi, who suggested that the board could contain between 12 and 14 members, and that it should be for the BBC to decide. The BBC will determine the number of additional non-executive directors as well as the split between executive directors and NEDs on the board, which will comprise a total board membership of between 12 and 14.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): On behalf of my constituents in Herefordshire perhaps I may gently correct my beloved colleague from
the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson), on the identity of my constituency.

I congratulate the Secretary of State on this White Paper. The Culture, Media and Sport Committee will be scrutinising the detail, but I welcome the recognition of the BBC’s important achievements, public service ethos, and potential as a global broadcaster. I also welcome the fact that the White Paper has incorporated ofcom, the 11-year charter, and the National Audit Office.

However, we did identify issues about the culture of the BBC. I do not know whether the Secretary of State saw the excellent article in The Guardian today by Lenny Henry about black and minority ethnic representation, on which the BBC has historically been weak, but I very much welcome what has been said. Will the Secretary of State say a little more about how that will be enforced, and whether there might be a specific duty on Ofcom to keep an eye of those aspects of the charter in particular?

Mr Whittingdale: I am extremely grateful to the Chairman of the Select Committee for his welcome for our proposals. It is absolutely right that we looked carefully at the recommendations in the report the Committee produced under his chairmanship, as indeed the Government examined the proposals in the report produced under the previous Chairman—both were highly influential. On his specific point, as I have made clear, the Government believe that diversity should be a central priority of the BBC, which is why, for the first time, we are enshrining it in the public purposes. Precisely how the BBC goes about delivering that is a matter for the BBC, but because it is now within the public purposes, it will be for the external regulator, Ofcom, to determine whether it is delivering on that purpose.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am sorry to say this to the Secretary of State but the British people will not be fooled by his words today. Some fantasy foxes might have been shot this morning, but I believe that by Sunday, as with the Budget, when the detail has been crawled over, this will be seen as a deep, dark day for the BBC.

Mr Whittingdale: That was utterly desperate. Just because the hon. Gentleman cannot find anything in the statement to disagree with, he now thinks there must be something hidden away that I have not mentioned to which he can object. The detail of the White Paper is well known to the director-general and the chairman of the BBC Trust, both of whom have said it is an excellent White Paper that will help to ensure that the BBC continues to thrive.

Mr Whittingdale: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, who is right to highlight this point. A number of people have been pressing this matter, not least my hon. Friend the Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy, who is sitting beside me, and the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), whom I am pleased to see in his place. I would also like to thank Lenny Henry, who has been in to talk to us several times about the matter.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), because research we have conducted shows that, although appreciation of the BBC is high throughout the country, there is a feeling, particularly among some black, Asian and minority ethnic audiences, that they are underserved. We are very keen to address that, in terms of both the diverse range of talent behind the camera and in the production process and those who appear on-screen. In particular, we want to ensure that those who choose to watch the BBC, from every section of our community, find programming they want to watch.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): By their deeds shall ye know them. In 2010 and 2015, Tory Governments raided the BBC budget to pay for Government expenditure. Will the Secretary of State now accept that that was wrong and give an assurance that it will not happen again during this charter renewal period? His commitment to the BBC and its independence will be judged by this answer, not warm words.

Mr Whittingdale: First, raiding the BBC licence fee to pay for Government projects was something that the Labour Government initiated with the analogue switchover budget. Secondly, as I have made plain to the hon. Gentleman and as I said in my statement, the funding settlement we agreed with the BBC last year represented a broadly flat-cash settlement, taking into account the agreement that the licence fee should begin to rise again after a freeze, that we will close the iPlayer loophole and that we will do away with the top slices for broadband and local television. Thirdly, I was explicit that the licence fee settlement was for five years. The Government have no intention of revisiting that until the next licence fee settlement, which will be part of a new, more independent and transparent process in which we can discuss the funding needs of the BBC with the BBC.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Fifteen years ago, we started a campaign in the Public Accounts Committee to try to get the BBC’s accounts and spending accountable to the Comptroller and Auditor General—and it was like pulling steel teeth from concrete. Eventually, the Comptroller and Auditor General was allowed to investigate the matters that were chosen by the BBC itself. I know the Comptroller and Auditor General, and let me make it absolutely clear that there is no chance whatever of his getting involved in editorial policy. He is an utterly independent Officer of the House, but if more than £4 billion of public money is spent, the body that spends it should be held accountable for it.
Mr Whittingdale: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I remember his campaign when he was the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, and I recall that several previous Chairmen and all Chairmen since have been pressing this case. There is no question but that the National Audit Office is extremely effective in ensuring that the taxpayer—in this case, the licence fee payer—extracts maximum value for money. I spoke to the Comptroller and Auditor General yesterday, and he reiterated what my hon. Friend has said—that he has no interest or wish to get involved in independent editorial decisions. His sole concern is to make sure that the public get the maximum value from the money they put into the BBC.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I, too, welcome the development of the BBC’s new diversity strategy and the fact that diversity will be enshrined in the new charter. How, though, will this relate to the representation of sick and disabled people, including on the board of the BBC Trust, within its own workforce and that of its contractors?

Mr Whittingdale: I understand the hon. Lady’s concern, but I think she will accept that many of these matters are for the BBC rather than for the Government to lay down, particularly in respect of how the BBC goes about serving all its different audiences that make up the UK. On board membership, there will be opportunities for non-executive directors to be chosen not just under the public appointments process as set out by the Government, but by the BBC board. I am sure that it will want to appoint the best possible people to represent every section of the community.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I welcome the restatement of financial protection for the BBC World Service, and I particularly welcome the recommendation that the new unitary board should consider the relative weakness of BBC World News on television. How fast does my right hon. Friend expect the board to come forward with proposals to address that situation?

Mr Whittingdale: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the BBC World Service is admired across the world and does a fantastic job projecting this country’s values around the globe. BBC global news is a different beast—it is a separate commercial subsidiary of the BBC, which actually loses money—and it is perhaps not achieving the same success as the World Service. We have said that the BBC needs to look at that carefully and with a view to either making it perform much better or examining different ways of achieving the objectives.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I am relieved that the Secretary of State has resisted the temptation to be the BBC’s Fat Controller. However, to demonstrate that he will keep his hands off all the levers, will he confirm that there will be clear and transparent processes for appointing the board, setting the licence fee and ensuring that the public’s voice is heard for Parliament’s approval of the charter? Finally, will the BBC health check that he mentioned be just that rather than the precursor to a major operation?

Mr Whittingdale: I think I can confirm everything that the right hon. Gentleman has asked me to confirm. The mid-term review is indeed a health check. We have no intention or wish to revisit the charter and agreement unless it appears that something has gone very badly wrong and we need to make amendments. The world is changing fast and we do not know exactly what the media landscape will look like in five years’ time. That is the reason for the health check, but I repeat that it is certainly not our intention for it to represent any sort of mini-charter review.

As I have said, future appointments made by the Government will be made through the public appointments process, which will involve the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments and a panel that will assess the suitability of those who apply for positions. We have said that the process of setting the future licence fee will be more independent and transparent, and that the BBC and the Government will have a proper opportunity to discuss funding needs. As for the issue of public opinion, the board will be expected—this will be a clear expectation—to establish mechanisms whereby it will take account of the views of the public on all aspects of the BBC’s operations.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on listening to the voices of sanity in this debate, and, indeed, on being one of the voices of sanity this morning. He has broadly achieved a system of outside regulation that holds the BBC properly to account without in any way damaging its vital role at the heart of the cultural life of this country. May I, however, ask him about one detail? Will he confirm that the National Audit Office will audit only the publicly funded part of the BBC, given that auditing its private commercial operations would constitute an unprecedented extension of the NAO into the private sector?

Mr Whittingdale: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his comments. Given his long-time knowledge of and interest in the BBC, I am pleased that he agrees that our proposals represent a good, strong future for the BBC.

My right hon. Friend asked specifically about the National Audit Office. It has been agreed that the NAO should be able to conduct value-for-money studies of all publicly funded aspects of the BBC’s operation, and to become the financial auditor. The licence fee payer has a strong interest in the BBC’s commercial activities, because the more the BBC can raise through those activities, the less will be the call on the licence fee payer. We are continuing to discuss the extent to which, and how, the National Audit Office should examine whether full value for money is being obtained from BBC Worldwide. I would point out, however, that one of the greatest disasters for the BBC, which resulted in its loss of £100 million, was the acquisition of Lonely Planet by BBC Worldwide.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I thank the Secretary of State for providing early sight of his statement, much of which I welcome. He has said that the BBC will become more accountable to the devolved nations. Will he tell us a little more about how that will be achieved in Wales?

Mr Whittingdale: My answer to the hon. Gentleman is very similar to the answer that I gave the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson), Wales,
Mr Whittingdale: I hugely appreciate the right hon. Gentleman’s remarks. He has an extremely strong track record of campaigning in this area, and for him to welcome our proposals in this way is extremely encouraging. I also agree that there is a lot more work to do. It will be for the BBC to make decisions on the allocation of budgets and on how it goes about delivering on the new, explicit requirement that has been set out. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will continue to talk to the BBC about that, as will we.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The point about diversity, which I support, is that its target should be inclusiveness so that people can be drawn together.

On page 74 of the White Paper, my right hon. Friend mentions digital radio. If he comes down from London to Worthing, by bus or any other form of road transport, and drives along the coast in Worthing, he will find enormous gaps in the digital radio coverage. Will he please ensure that we do not exclude those who listen to the radio on the move?

I want to make three detailed points about the wording of the White Paper. On page 98, he states: “The government is clear that the licence fee is a tax.”

At some stage, I would like to hear an explanation of why it is seen as a tax rather than a fee that is separate from taxation.

On page 102, he talks about the “popularity of subscription services”. It would be more accurate to talk about the incidence of those services rather than their popularity. Most people do not like paying, but they feel that they are forced to do so because what they want to watch is on subscription.

In the glossary, the last entry is for a WOCC. Would he like to explain what the term “window of competitive culture”, or whatever it is, actually means?

Mr Whittingdale: I would be very happy to do so. On the issue of digital audio broadcasting, I fully recognise that there is still some way to go to achieve the coverage that will be necessary before we can consider switching off analogue. The ability to listen to DAB on the move in cars is one of the crucial factors that will influence our decision, and there is still more work to be done. However, we expect the BBC to continue to take a leading role in this regard. My hon. Friend asked some specific questions. It has long been recognised that the licence fee is essentially a tax, because it is a compulsory fee imposed by the Government and enforced by criminal sanction. It is recognised as a tax by the Office for Budget Responsibility and others on that basis.
I turn now to my hon. Friend’s specific question about what is known colloquially as the WOCC. The window of creative competition was put in place by the BBC. Under the existing arrangements, the independent production quota is 25% and then the WOCC accounts for another 25% chunk of content, which can be competed for by the independent production sector. The remaining 50% is reserved for the BBC’s in-house production. It is that 50% that we are removing, so, in essence, our proposal is to increase the WOCC to 75%.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I was pleased to note that particular mention was made of MG Alba and S4C, the two channels that support two unique minority languages and cultures of the British Isles. However, I also note that the statement referred only to maintaining production quotas outside London, which is a little disappointing for us in Scotland, because we were hoping that the quotas would be increased. Will he assure us that he supports further decentralisation and the improvement of commissioning opportunities for the regions and countries of the UK?

Mr Whittingdale: The quotas are of course a minimum requirement, and it is for the BBC to do its best to exceed them. In answer to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson), I referred to the letter that the director-general sent today to the Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe & External Affairs in the Scottish Government, in which he commits the BBC to continuing to do its best to increase the proportion of BBC network production expenditure in each of the nations of the UK. He said “we recognise that this spend needs to work harder” and that he will be doing his best to ensure that Scotland receives funding that at least is proportional to its population. I am sure that the hon. Lady and her colleagues can pursue that further with the director-general.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): As a former employee of the BBC, I share in the great affection for the corporation and, as such, congratulate the Secretary of State on this White Paper, which I broadly welcome. However, does he agree that, with the BBC’s income from the public now guaranteed to be fast approaching £4 billion a year, not only is it right that the corporation be more transparent and accountable, but there is no reason for it to make cuts to front-line services, particularly not BBC local radio? I worked in it for many years, and local radio, particularly BBC Radio Devon in my constituency, is a hugely valued part of the community.

Mr Whittingdale: I agree with my hon. Friend. The BBC now has certainty about its funding over the course of the next licence fee period, and I hope that it will continue to recognise the importance of local radio. The matter was raised by several hon. Members in our discussion yesterday, and I made it clear then that I regard local radio as something that best exemplifies the BBC’s public service remit. I hope that the National Audit Office’s work will bear out that there is scope for achieving efficiencies, so that even more of the licence fee payers’ money can be devoted to front-line services such as local radio.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Many of my constituents work in the television sector, will have responded to the consultation and will welcome many aspects of today’s statement. Along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), I welcome the specific mention of black and minority ethnicity representation, but does the Secretary of State acknowledge that diversity in front of and behind the camera also encompasses gender, sexual orientation, disability, faith and social class? Will we see a statement in due course about what that means in the context of today’s statement?

Mr Whittingdale: I agree with the hon. Lady on stressing the importance of diversity in all that the BBC does, which is about not only serving BAME audiences and ensuring greater representation both in front of and behind the camera, but gender equality and disabled people. It is for the BBC to draw up its own plans and to deliver the general public purpose that we have set out, but it will also obviously be held to account by Ofcom. It is not for us to tell the BBC precisely how the purpose should be delivered.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): My constituency has six local newspapers, which are vital in providing news to the local community. We all know the pressures faced by local newspapers across the country, particularly as more and more of us get our news online. How will the new charter help to ensure that the BBC’s very successful website does not have the unintended consequence of driving people away from local newspapers and their websites?

Mr Whittingdale: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that, because I agree with her that it is tremendously important. Local newspapers play a vital role in sustaining local democracy and will become more important as more powers are passed down to devolved Administrations and local government. For quite some time I have therefore sought to encourage the BBC to support local newspapers, rather than undermine them, as it has occasionally been accused of doing. I am delighted that an agreement has been reached in principle between the BBC and the News Media Association, which represents the local press, whereby the BBC has now agreed to fund a reporting service to cover local authorities and public services. It intends to fund 150 journalists, who will be employed by qualifying local organisations, not by the BBC. In that way, the BBC will be obtaining greater content on what is going on in local authorities and local government. For quite some time I have been pressing my right hon. Friend, and behind the scenes of the BBC, to ensure that it does, which is about not only serving BAME audiences but acknowledging that diversity in front of and behind the camera also encompasses gender, sexual orientation, disability, faith and social class? Will we see a statement in due course about what that means in the context of today’s statement?

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Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Has the Secretary of State given any thought to the thousands of students in this country who do not have televisions in their student rooms but may occasionally watch BBC iPlayer on their computers? Will he give some consideration to them? Going to university costs enough as it is, so will he please consider exempting them from the closure of the iPlayer loophole?

Mr Whittingdale: There is a long-standing principle that those who enjoy public service television should be required to pay for it through the licence fee. There is no
question but that the advent of the iPlayer and catch-up services has created a loophole, which has meant that the BBC has lost a significant, and probably growing, amount of revenue. It was part of the agreement that we reached with the BBC last year that we should close that loophole and, in essence, apply the same rules in today’s age as have always applied in the past: if someone watches public service content, they should pay the licence fee, which funds the BBC.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): This statement is welcome and it confirms that the BBC does a very good job overall, but what are the Government doing to ensure fairness in its coverage of the EU referendum campaign, especially given that the BBC receives large amounts of EU funding—tens of millions of pounds in recent years?

Mr Whittingdale: As I have previously set out, we have now put impartiality as one of the first requirements in the public purposes of the BBC. Ensuring impartiality becomes particularly challenging in such a hotly contested issue as our membership of the European Union, which is why I asked the BBC to ensure that it had a fast-track system for resolving complaints of bias from either side of the argument. I was pleased that the BBC Trust agreed that that would be put in place and recognised its importance. I should also say that that requirement for impartiality does not just apply to the BBC; it applies to all those with a broadcasting licence, who are required to be objective and impartial. That includes the commercial broadcasters, as well as the BBC.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): My constituents are very concerned about the independence of the BBC. As the Secretary of State has already quoted comments by the director-general this morning, let me ask him what he thinks of the following comment from the director-general:

“I do not believe that the appointments proposals for the new unitary board are yet right.”

What does he mean by that?

Mr Whittingdale: That is an issue that we will continue to discuss with the BBC. However, I would simply say to the director-general and others that the proposals that we have put in place are those that were recommended by Sir David Clementi. They do allow the BBC to appoint at least half the membership of its board, and we have ensured that the BBC director-general’s editorial independence is enshrined in the charter.

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): As chairman of the all-party group on commercial radio, I welcome the comments that the Secretary of State has made about the need for distinctiveness, as there has been a concern that some BBC stations are mimicking those in the commercial sector. That factor combined with the removal of the 50% guarantee on in-house production will not only enhance the BBC, but allow the commercial sector, and commercial radio, to flourish alongside it, making room for both.

Mr Whittingdale: I am aware of the concerns expressed by commercial radio about some aspects of BBC radio provision. Certainly, the requirement that there should be distinctiveness in BBC services applies to radio just as it does to television. In future, if commercial radio has complaints, it will of course be able to voice them to Ofcom, the independent regulator. On the opening up of content for independent production, the 100% ambition that we have set the BBC applies to television. For radio, the BBC has agreed that it will aim to reach 60%, which would represent a huge increase on the present level, and provide sufficient opportunities to the radio independent production sector.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming the BBC’s announcement today of substantial additional investment in production and commissioning in Birmingham following the campaign of Birmingham’s MPs, the City Council and the Birmingham Post and the Birmingham Mail? Does the Secretary of State understand the residual strong concern felt across this House that the independence and integrity of the BBC, the jewel in the crown of public service broadcasting excellence and fêted worldwide, should never ever be violated by any Government?

Mr Whittingdale: Obviously, I welcome the BBC’s announcement of additional investment in Birmingham. The local newspaper initiative that I mentioned earlier is going to be based at BBC Birmingham. I am aware that Members representing west midlands constituencies have long pressed the BBC to do more. It is a matter for the BBC, but I welcome the fact that it is responding to that. I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman’s second point: the integrity and impartiality of the BBC is absolutely fundamental. It is the reason the BBC is respected around the world, and we are determined to preserve and, if anything, strengthen it.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Online, some of the BBC’s content, such as football match reports and many other things, cannot always be found to be distinctive. Can my right hon. Friend reassure the House that this distinctiveness test will absolutely apply online as well as on television and radio?

Mr Whittingdale: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. The BBC rightly wishes to make available its news content on whichever platform viewers and listeners choose to access it, and that includes online. There have been concerns that, sometimes, BBC online services have strayed too far away from that into soft news and beyond, and that represents unfair competition. The requirement for distinction will apply online just as it does to all other BBC services, and that can be adjudicated by Ofcom.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I wish to press the Secretary of State on some of the detail of his statement, especially given the concern that many of us have to protect all members of BBC staff from politically motivated attempts to interfere in their work. He said very clearly that editorial independence would be guaranteed pre-transmission, but in his statement today he sets out that the unitary board “will consider any issues or complaints that arise post-transmission.”
Will he clarify to whom the Government appointees on that board will be accountable for their interventions—will it be to the Government or the licence fee payers?

**Mr Whittingdale:** The position as regards reporting for the Government appointees, chosen through the public appointment process, will be no different from the responsibilities of the BBC Trust. Once appointed, they are independent and are not subject to any instruction by the Government. They will be accountable to the licence fee payers and to Parliament, which is where Select Committees have a very important role. I agree with the hon. Lady about the importance of not having any political pressure put on BBC employees, whatever their level, so I hope that she will join me in condemning the petition initiated by the “Jeremy for PM” campaign, which now has 15,000 signatures, calling for the sacking of the BBC political editor because they did not like one of the stories she reported.

**Chloe Smith** (Norwich North) (Con): I welcome the financial certainty, editorial independence and sensible modernisation measures set out in the White Paper. I also particularly welcome the possibility of real economic benefit to my city of Norwich, home to a growing creative sector, through increased purchasing of independent content. Can the Secretary of State give any estimate of job numbers that might be linked to the measure?

**Mr Whittingdale:** First, let me say that I imagine that my hon. Friend’s constituency is not particularly happy today and I send my condolences on another front for which I am responsible, which is sport. I cannot give my hon. Friend a precise figure for the potential job opportunities offered by opening up competition, but we believe that allowing the independent production sector the ability to compete for 100% of the BBC’s content will mean that hundreds of millions of pounds are available for the sector should it win those commissions. Obviously, that will create jobs alongside. The creative industries, as I said, have proved to be one of our most successful sectors of the economy with the fastest rate of job creation.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Given how from “Listen with Mother” to “Rastamouse”, children’s programming has been so important to the reputation of the BBC and its Reithian ideal to educate, will the Secretary of State make an absolute commitment today that he will exempt that sector of programming from any possible charges for iPlayer or on-demand services?

**Mr Whittingdale:** As I said earlier, none of the BBC’s existing services will be made subject to voluntary subscription through the iPlayer. The pilot that the BBC is considering will be for additional services that are not currently provided and funded by the licence fee. I hope that the BBC will consider boosting children’s programming, because I agree that it is fundamental. It is an area where access through the iPlayer is likely to be higher than that for other sections of the population. I am also keen to increase the amount of children’s programming available, which is why we see the contestable pot to which I referred as a possible vehicle for additional opportunities so that children have more choice in the programming available to them.

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): Despite what some Members on the Government Benches might say, particularly people who have worked at the BBC, we want it to remain popular and distinctive. That is something that all politicians, on both sides of the House, can only hope to be. We have heard today from the Secretary of State that there is no perfect model for the BBC licence fee in a changing media landscape. How we listen, watch and contribute to the ratings is changing, so I welcome the freedom on BBC budgets. As part of the flexible arrangements for payments in the White Paper process, can we consider a fee for using only the radio content of the BBC?

**Mr Whittingdale:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and she is right that there is a wealth of experience on both sides of the House among Members who have worked in or with the BBC. On the question of more flexible arrangements for payment of the licence fee, in particular we wanted to allow the BBC to assist those on low incomes by not requiring it to take a year’s licence fee in the first six months. Her suggestion about having a reduced licence fee for those who listen only to the radio is not something we intend to pursue in this licence fee period, but, as I have said, the way in which technology is changing so rapidly will call into question the sustainability of the existing model over time. I have no doubt that there will be a substantial debate around these issues at the time of the next charter review.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): I hope that on this occasion, Mr Speaker, you will consider the question to be of sufficient importance to merit re-emphasis. I welcome the White Paper, which seems to me to recognise that the BBC is a national treasure that marks us out from other western countries. Can the Secretary of State assure the House that the welcome commitment to invigorate local democracy will not be at the expense of independent local media outlets, such as The Breeze radio and the Gloucestershire Echo in Cheltenham, which do a lot to inform and entertain my constituents?

**Mr Whittingdale:** My hon. Friend should not apologise for raising the matter again because it is extremely important. When the BBC first floated the idea of supporting local news provision by employing journalists, there was some confusion. Some people thought that the BBC was intending to employ them directly, which I think would have posed a threat to existing commercial local news providers. I am delighted that the agreement which has now been reached makes it plain that although the BBC will fund journalism, journalists will be employed by qualifying local news organisations. I imagine that the excellent examples of new organisations that my hon. Friend has mentioned from his constituency would be eligible to apply for that funding, should they choose to do so.

**Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): Although I welcome greater diversity specifically for our devolved nations, that must not be at the expense of our United Kingdom. The Secretary of State mentioned that the BBC must reflect our common national identity, but there are those who do not believe in a common national British identity. Given that we might unintentionally create a wedge between Scotland and England particularly,
may I urge my right hon. Friend to exercise caution about the amount of diversity that is given to the devolved nations?

Mr Whittingdale: I agree with my right hon. Friend. We do think it is important that the BBC serves all the individual nations and regions of the United Kingdom. That is set out in the charter as one of the public purposes. However, my hon. Friend is right that the BBC is a UK national broadcaster, and it is there to unite the nation and to focus on all the many things we have in common and which bring us together. I hope that that will long remain the case.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware that my constituency was made somewhat infamous by the iconic BBC series “Fawlty Towers” and the antics of Basil Fawlty, which were based on a real hotel owner. Some of the things he had actually done had to be left out as being too ridiculous. Today, services such as BBC Radio Devon and locally produced TV programmes are very much appreciated in Torbay and there is a modern creative industry. What does my right hon. Friend see in the White Paper that will help boost that industry and ensure that more programmes like “Fawlty Towers” are produced in the future?

Mr Whittingdale: Having visited Torbay as part of the tourism inquiry that the Select Committee conducted in the previous Parliament, I am delighted that although “Fawlty Towers” may have been based on a hotel at one time, Torbay hotels today bear no resemblance to Fawlty Towers. The series is an example of creative comedy, which the BBC excels at. It is important that the BBC should continue to make productions all across the United Kingdom. In Cornwall “Poldark” has been extremely successful, and I hope that the south-west will continue to benefit from BBC investment in production, which, as we said earlier, drives growth and creates a large number of jobs.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I welcome the White Paper and congratulate the Secretary of State. It is very much what I had in mind when I filled in the consultation exercise. May we have a little more detail about the health check? As stated on page 58, matters that can be changed are “Future funding issues, including an assessment of the BBC’s commercial income and activities”. What cannot be changed is “the fundamental mission, purposes, and licence fee model”.

Will there be an opportunity for Parliament to scrutinise further the exact language? I believe that the devil will be in the detail, and the clause will have great importance in the unlikely event that a Government are elected in 2020 who are not as supportive of the BBC as this Government—they have clearly demonstrated that support today.

Mr Whittingdale: We have sought to reassure the BBC that there is no intention of reopening some of the fundamental decisions that have been taken for the next charter. It is a health check, as I said earlier—an opportunity to ensure that the reforms that we are putting in place are working as we intended and that the BBC is taking account of any changes that have happened over the period. As I have said, this is an area where the technology is changing very fast. We cannot bind another Government. However, we are trying to ensure that the charter is fit for purpose for the next 10 years. Having set out our proposals for the new charter, we certainly have no intention of revisiting those fundamental principles until the next one.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Given the scale of the gap between the sometimes ridiculous scaremongering of the left and the luvvies, and the sheer common sense of the White Paper, has the Secretary of State received an apology, or even an iota of support, from some of those luvvies who have been somewhat unkind to him recently?

Mr Whittingdale: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his support. In answer to his question, I am not going to hold my breath. However, to give them their due, they will have discovered only this morning what the Government intended, having previously relied on hysterical reports in the media. Now that they have seen that what we are setting out does not threaten the BBC but will actually strengthen it and ensure that it continues to thrive, I hope that they will welcome our proposals.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): As my right hon. Friend has said in earlier answers, BBC local radio comes the closest to the corporation’s remit as a public service broadcaster. I therefore very much welcome the future publication of significant talent salaries, because I dare say that several of those could pay for an excellent county station such as BBC Sussex.

Mr Whittingdale: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; there is a huge gulf between expenditure on BBC local radio—I know from my county of Essex that in the local radio station the paint is sometimes peeling off the walls and it can barely afford a coffee maker—and some of the very substantial remuneration packages enjoyed by certain individuals. Although they may be extremely talented, that is one of the reasons the Government felt that the public have a right to know who they are.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I was very interested to hear what the Secretary of State had to say about diversifying the BBC’s revenue streams, particularly by providing new services and reaching viewers outside this country. When can we expect to hear more on that?

Mr Whittingdale: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to that. At the moment, as he will be aware, it is not legally possible to access BBC content through the iPlayer from overseas. We have two objectives in changing that. First, we believe very strongly that UK citizens who have already paid the licence fee should be able to enjoy content even if they happen to be on holiday on the continent of Europe. That is the portability requirement that we are looking to the BBC to put in place, as indeed we will ask other broadcasters to do. Secondly, there is a substantial amount of piracy going on, with people who have not paid the licence fee using virtual private networks or getting around the geo-block in order to access BBC content. That
demonstrates that there is a demand for that content, so we are keen to encourage the BBC to make it available legally and ask people to pay for it.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s strong support for the World Service, whose impartial and objective news is needed now more than ever. Is he confident that the World Service is sufficiently embracing new platforms for broadcasting around the world?

Mr Whittingdale: That is very much a matter for the BBC, but I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The World Service is hugely admired and respected, but if it is to continue to reach people in places where there is very limited access to impartial and objective news, it is important that it uses every means of delivery. I would certainly encourage the BBC to do that, and I am sure my hon. Friend will talk to it further about that.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement and the fact that some of the more radical proposals that have been floated have not been included. He has spoken of the importance of local radio, which will be well demonstrated in my area on Sunday afternoon, when Grimsby Town will make yet another attempt to regain football league status and thousands of fans will be listening to Radio Humberside. However, the future is also local TV, and my constituency is well served by Estuary TV. Does my right hon. Friend see a role for the BBC in local TV stations?

Mr Whittingdale: I am sorry I am not able to join my hon. Friend to watch Grimsby. However, the BBC has had a role in supporting local television, as he will be aware. As part of the last licence fee settlement, a fund was made available to support local television, but it was always clear that that was for a limited period. The fund was to allow local television to become established, and then local television would be expected to pay for itself, rather than relying on subsidy from licence fee payers. I am afraid I have to say to my hon. Friend that there are no plans to go beyond the existing support that is given to local television.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my hope that, if the BBC successfully introduces additional subscription services, that will encourage it to have the confidence to move away from the current outdated financing model and to a system more suited to the 21st century, giving individuals the freedom to choose whether to pay a licence fee?

Mr Whittingdale: My hon. Friend is right that the world is changing fast, and there may come a time when the existing model becomes harder to sustain. I think that the BBC has recognised that, and the proposals I referred to are proposals by the BBC. The BBC will set up the pilots and assess them, and the information that is obtained from them will be used to inform the next charter process, when new options for funding models may become available.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): I welcome the statement and especially the part about enhancing the BBC’s local output. In Northamptonshire, BBC local radio output is of the highest quality and integrity, and I congratulate and thank Stuart Linnell, Bernie Keith, Helen Blaby, John Griff, Annabel Amos and the news and production teams for the service they provide. How does the Secretary of State envisage the new royal charter enhancing these services in future?

Mr Whittingdale: I share my hon. Friend’s admiration for local radio and local services. The BBC’s general requirement to serve the nations and regions is set out clearly. Ofcom will be producing service licences, which will make clear the expectation on the BBC and provide further detail of how we expect it to meet that requirement. That is a matter that Ofcom will be concentrating on in the coming months in drawing up those service licences. However, I said yesterday, and I repeat again today, that I regard local radio as one of those aspects of BBC services that are fundamental to the delivery of its public service remit and that are not provided by the commercial sector.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I welcome the requirement for more productions to be tendered. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that will help to right an historic imbalance, given the share of production that is lacking across the east midlands? That will inevitably give my constituents more value for their licence fee and help to increase my local creative industries’ business, which is definitely good news.

Mr Whittingdale: I do agree with my hon. Friend. There is no doubt that there are incredibly innovative and successful independent production companies in every part of the United Kingdom, and I have absolutely no doubt that the east midlands is one of those parts. Opening up the whole of the schedule for competition will give much more opportunity to the independent production sector. It will support the companies in her area as it will across the rest of the UK, and it will give more choice to BBC commissioning editors and therefore, ultimately, higher-quality programmes for viewers.
Points of Order

12.59 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you know, on 28 April the Leader of the House, in response to the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), made a defamatory statement about the Humberside Labour party’s prospective police and crime commissioner candidate in which, the Leader of the House stated:

“My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am aware of allegations about the Labour PCC candidate in Humberside. If the stories alleged about that candidate are true, he is unfit for public office, and it is a matter of public interest that the truth should be known before election day.”—[Official Report, 28 April 2016, Vol. 608, c. 1564-5.]

I wrote to the Leader of the House asking him for the precise basis of these remarks, and either to tell us what they were about or withdraw them. He did not have the courtesy to respond to me, so, Mr Speaker, on 10 May you allowed me to raise the matter as a point of order.

Yesterday, the Leader of the House did trouble himself to reply to me. I have to say that it is a shame that he has not stayed around to answer this point of order, knowing that it is to be raised. He simply says this in his answer to me:

“Thank you for your letter of 3 May regarding my response to the Member for Brigg and Goole at Business Questions on... 28 April.

My understanding is that you are fully aware of the points...I raised.”

Well, I am not fully aware of the points raised by the Leader of the House. I suspect that the points raised by the Leader of the House are a figment of his imagination, because I have now had the opportunity to speak to the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole, and he assures me—and I believe him—that he was not referring to the Labour party candidate in Humberside, Keith Hunter, when he asked the question.

Will you, Mr Speaker, advise me on two matters? First, what can be done about Cabinet members coming to the Dispatch Box and using this place for vicious party political campaigning, knowing full well that when they make statements they will have traction in the media, causing people to have to answer to media inquiries? Secondly, will you advise me on what Members do about receiving what can be only be said is an incredibly rude, discourteous response from the Leader of the House?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. Let me say the following. First, in so far as he has a concern about what he describes as the use of the Dispatch Box for “vicious party political campaigning”, that is somewhat beyond my purview. I have no ambition to try to bring an end to such activity, and I do not think that ambition would be a realistic one.

Secondly, the hon. Gentleman has made his concern on this matter clear. As I said on Monday in response to his point of order on that occasion, what is said in this place by any Member—any Member—is the responsibility of that Member. It is for the Leader of the House to decide whether he wishes to correct or to clarify what he said about this matter. The hon. Gentleman referred to “vicious party political campaigning”, but, in trying to be helpful to him, I detect that what concerns him is what he judges to be an incorrect, inaccurate or false personal attack. My answer to that is that each Member must take responsibility. Members have parliamentary privilege. That parliamentary privilege must be used with care and responsibility. If it is not, it is damaging to the doctrine of parliamentary privilege and to the rights not only of the Member concerned but those of Members across the House. Whether it is necessary for anything to be said by the Leader of the House is not, at this stage, something that I can possibly judge. However, I have tried to give as full and fair a response to the hon. Gentleman as I can.

Mr Davis: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is similar to the point of order made by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner). It is about qualified privilege, public record and the protection of the reputation of ordinary citizens, not necessary political people. On 20 April, in response to a parliamentary question, the Prime Minister referred to Mr Suliman Gani and said, “this man supports IS” —Islamic State. That is an incredibly serious allegation, with massive reputational implications. It might restrict somebody’s right to travel, perhaps to the US, and it could even put his safety and that of his family at risk.

It transpires that the allegation was not true. On Monday this week, I wrote to the Prime Minister asking him to correct this, and, to be fair, there was an apology and correction issued by a spokesman of 10 Downing Street yesterday. Of course, that did not have the same prominence as the original allegation and, in many ways just as importantly, does not correct the original allegation in the official record, which can still be published by others under qualified privilege—perhaps people who do not follow our affairs quite so closely. I am very concerned about the consequences of that, and I want to ask you, Mr Speaker, what can be done by the House or by the Government to protect people such as Mr Gani from the further consequence of a serious calumny—no matter how unintentional—against his reputation.

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and for his courtesy to me in providing notice of it. I understand that the Prime Minister has answered a written question on this matter today seeking to clarify what he said in the House, and this is available on the parliamentary website in the usual way. However, I appreciate that Members are here and they want a specific and informative reply. They may well not yet have consulted the parliamentary website.

The question was tabled by the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) and was answered by the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister has answered:

“I was referring to reports that Mr Gani supports an Islamic state. I am clear that this does not mean Mr Gani supports the organisation Daesh and I apologise to him for any misunderstanding.”

As I have said before—indeed, only a few moments ago, in response to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner)—what a Member says in this place is the responsibility of that Member. I reiterate, as I often do, that, while parliamentary privilege is an essential protection of free speech, all Members should reflect carefully before criticising individuals. As “Erskine May” notes, it is...
“the duty of each Member to refrain from any course of action prejudicial to the privilege which he enjoys.”

I have already referred to the written answer, and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) has referred to what I understand to be an apology issued by a spokesperson last night. It is not for the Chair to require a Member to apologise on the Floor of the House, but it is perfectly open to a Member to do so, and good grace and magnanimity in these circumstances are, I know, always appreciated.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the business question on 5 May 2016, the Leader of the House said, at column 309:

“I should inform the House that Ministers will provide a quarterly update on Syria before Prorogation.”—[Official Report, 5 May 2016; Vol. 609, c. 309.]

As you will recall, Mr Speaker, quarterly reports were included in the motion agreed to in this House on 2 December 2015. As the first few days of the new Session will be taken up with the Queen’s Speech debate, I seek your guidance on when will be the very first opportunity that we can have a statement from the Government on the situation in Syria and on our military involvement.

Mr Speaker: Realistically, it seems to me that a statement cannot be made to the House for at least a week, and it may be for somewhat longer than that. I take very seriously the point of order that the hon. Lady has raised. I am bound to say that I recalled what was said during the business question last week, and I therefore rather anticipated that there would be such a statement today.

Indeed, that expectation was shared by a very conscientious—not especially senior, but very conscientious—Government Whip who, when he approached me about another matter this morning, referred to the first of the statements. I advised him that there was only one Government statement today, to which he replied, “Oh, but Mr Speaker, I thought there was a statement on Syria.” I said, “Well, you are a member of the Government Whips Office, but you are obviously not fully in the know.”

The answer is that there appears not to have been a statement on Syria, but the House was told that there would be one. Some private understanding may very well have been reached between the Front Benches—I have no way of knowing—but I would say that, whether or not that is the case, there must be respect for the rights of the House and its legitimate expectations as a whole. This is not just a matter of what Front Benches may or may not have agreed.

I confess that I was looking forward to the statement, which seemed to me to be on a very important matter. The Government Chief Whip, who is unfailingly courteous to me and to all Members, is in his place and has heard what has been said. The Government made a very good commitment and I very much hope—that let us just put it like that—that we can have the statement as soon as is practicable. There is a lot of parliamentary interest in the matter, and I know that the Government will not want to disappoint.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. You will be aware that I have been pursuing the issue of the Syrian quarterly statements for some months now in a dogged and possibly irritating fashion. I of course accept that the Government have made a number of statements on this matter—on the siege of Aleppo, the Russian intervention, the humanitarian conference—but they have rarely focused on the matter that I think the Prime Minister promised to report on, which is the RAF’s action against Daesh in Syria.

Like you, Mr Speaker, I was looking forward to finally getting a statement today, as the Leader of the House promised a week ago. I fail to understand why it is not on the Order Paper. I wonder whether there are other mechanisms that we could use, perhaps immediately after the Queen’s Speech, particularly if there have been any significant developments. For instance, would you permit an urgent question to be asked or any other parliamentary procedures to be used to enable the House to be briefed on this matter as soon as possible, as the Leader of the House promised a week ago?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for what he has said. By the way, people periodically irritate other people, but Members hardly ever irritate me. I am always happy to hear Members, and I was very happy to hear his hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) yesterday. In fact, so keen was I to hear the hon. Gentleman that I called him about 10 minutes into injury time. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will not have any complaints. He is a robust character and can look after himself. In any case, he has a good sense of humour.

I do not think that I can offer the prospect of a statement next Wednesday. That will simply not be practical. I think that we have to balance the understandable disappointment on the part of many Members about the fact that there has not been a statement today with a degree of reasonableness about when such a statement can take place. I do not think that we will serve the House by interrupting the Queen’s Speech debate next Wednesday. I do not think there is a precedent for that, and it is not necessary.

However, I think the Government will be sensitive to the relative urgency of the matter. Certainly, if very disturbing news were to be included in that statement—I hope there would not be—that would, as it were, up the ante and emphasise that there is a premium on the delivery of such a statement at the earliest possible opportunity. I hope in future that, if commitments are made, they can be honoured, and then we will not have to have a re-run of this exchange. I note that the Leader of the House is now in the Chamber; he is welcome to respond to the point of order from the right hon. Gentleman if he wishes, but he is not under any obligation to do so.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling) indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is not under any obligation. I thought it would be wrong not to give him the chance.
1.15 pm  
Sitting suspended.

1.17 pm  
Sitting resumed.

MESSAGE TO ATTEND THE LORDS COMMISSIONERS

1.21 pm  
Message to attend the Lords Commissioners delivered by the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod.

The Speaker, with the House, went up to hear Her Majesty’s Commission; on their return, the Speaker sat in the Clerk’s place at the Table.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to acquaint the House that the House has been to the House of Peers where a Commission under the Great Seal was read, authorising the Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Driving Instructors (Registration) Act 2016
House of Commons Members’ Fund Act 2016
Immigration Act 2016
Energy Act 2016
Armed Forces Act 2016
Housing and Planning Act 2016
Mr Speaker: I have further to acquaint the House that the Baroness Stowell of Beeston, one of the Lords Commissioners, delivered Her Majesty’s Most Gracious Speech to both Houses of Parliament, in pursuance of Her Majesty’s Command. For greater accuracy I have obtained a copy, and also directed that the terms of the Speech be printed in the Journal of this House. Copies are being made available in the Vote Office.

The Speech was as follows:

**My Lords and Members of the House of Commons**

My Government’s legislative programme has pursued a one nation approach; helping working people by supporting aspiration and opportunity.

My Ministers have continued in their long-term plan to deliver economic stability and security at every stage of life. To this end, work has continued to bring the public finances under control and to reduce the deficit.

To support working people, legislation was passed to guarantee that key taxes would not rise during this Parliament, to ensure that those working 30 hours a week on the National Minimum Wage will not pay income tax and to increase the provision of free childcare to working families.

To support aspiration and opportunity, legislation was passed to grant housing association tenants the right to own their home.

My Ministers have pursued policies to reform the welfare system to modernise and deliver equity to tax-payers, including measures to cap welfare payments.

In the first year of this Parliament, my Ministers have driven forward important constitutional reforms.

Landmark legislation was enacted to enable a referendum on membership of the European Union to be held later this year.

My Government has sought to develop a productive working relationship with the devolved administrations. In relation to Scotland, legislation was passed to implement the recommendations of the Smith Commission, devolving substantial new powers to the Scottish Parliament. A draft Bill was published setting out a new framework for devolution in Wales in accordance with the Saint David’s Day Agreement. Legislation was enacted to implement the Fresh Start Agreement and reform the welfare system in Northern Ireland.

With regard to England, ground-breaking legislation was passed which will allow significant powers to be devolved to directly-elected Mayors, helping to create a Northern Powerhouse.

In the House of Commons, changes have been implemented to create fairer procedures to ensure that decisions affecting England, or England and Wales, can only be taken with the consent of the majority of Members of Parliament representing constituencies in those parts of our United Kingdom.

Modernising the public services continues to be a priority for my Ministers. Newly enacted legislation will deliver transparency to the way in which trades unions operate and will protect essential public services from strike action.

Legislation was passed to improve schools, with new powers to turn around failing and coasting schools and create more academies. This legislation also made provision to establish regional adoption agencies in England to ensure every child can be provided with a stable home.

It has been a key priority for my Government to achieve a strong, sustainable and balanced economy where the benefits are more evenly shared across the country and between industries.

New legislation passed in this session will ensure that the Bank of England is well equipped to fulfil its vital role of overseeing monetary policy and financial stability.

A Small Business Commissioner was established in statute to help small businesses compete and grow. Legislation was also passed to ease the regulatory burden on businesses.

To help build a modern competitive workforce, the Institute for Apprenticeships was established as part of the drive to create three million high quality apprenticeships.

In recognition of the vital role charities play, legislation was passed to give the Charity Commission new powers to protect the integrity of such bodies by preventing abuses of charitable status.

The defence of the Realm is an utmost priority for my Government. In this session legislation has been passed to support our gallant armed forces. My Ministers will continue with legislation to provide a new framework to govern the use and oversight of investigatory powers by law enforcement and the security and intelligence agencies.

My Ministers have pursued policies to reform the criminal justice system, including new legislation to improve the integrity and effectiveness of the police, and a comprehensive new framework to ban the new generation of psychoactive substances.

The new Immigration Act will provide powers to tackle illegal working and the exploitation of workers, and make it easier to deport those with no legal right to remain.

The Duke of Edinburgh and I were pleased to welcome His Excellency the President of The People’s Republic of China and Madame Peng in October, during whose visit my Government launched a new partnership with China. We enjoyed our fifth State Visit to Germany in June, and our visit to Malta in November, for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

My Government has continued to play a leading role in world affairs, promoting British interests and values, and protecting British citizens abroad, including in response to terrorist attacks in Tunisia, France, Belgium and elsewhere.

My Ministers have been at the forefront of the European Union and international response to Russian aggression in Ukraine, successfully ensuring the maintenance of tough sanctions.

My Government has played a leading role in the Global Coalition against Da’esh and co-hosted the London Syria conference which secured commitments to help refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. With European Union and other international partners, my Ministers have worked to address irregular migration across the Mediterranean and its causes.

The United Kingdom played a key role in delivering the Paris Climate Change Agreement.

Members of the House of Commons, I thank you for the provisions which you have made for the work and dignity of the Crown and for the public services.

**My Lords and Members of the House of Commons**

I pray that the blessing of Almighty God may rest upon your counsels.
PROROGATION

Mr Speaker: The Commission was also for proroguing this present Parliament, and the Baroness Stowell of Beeston said:

“By virtue of Her Majesty’s Commission which has now been read, we do, in Her Majesty’s name, and in obedience to Her Majesty’s Commands, prorogue this Parliament to Wednesday the eighteenth day of this May to be then here holden, and this Parliament is accordingly prorogued to Wednesday the eighteenth day of May.”

Westminster Hall
9.30 am

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I beg to move.
That this House has considered the Anti-Corruption Summit.

Hon. Members, members of the public and people watching this debate will not be surprised to learn that tackling corruption is one of the biggest items on the agenda this year. Barely a day goes by without it hitting the news. As co-chair of the all-party group on anti-corruption, I was keen to hold this debate so we can air the issues that the Government hope to tackle in the important summit next week and subject the summit to parliamentary scrutiny.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for awarding me this debate. Unusually for a Back-Bench debate, we are not here to criticise the Government. We may have some suggestions about how they can be a bit stronger, but we are here to congratulate the Prime Minister and the Government for holding the summit, for placing this issue at the top of the agenda and for consistently championing transparency and accountability as enablers of good governance. We want real actions and agreements from the summit next week, so that those important things can be taken forward and enforced. I will set the scene and explain how I see the agenda, and then I will ask the Minister some questions about how the summit will work, who will be there, what the key Government aims are and how we can enforce the actions that are agreed.

In next Thursday’s summit, international partners will, we hope, agree a package of practical steps to expose corruption, punish the perpetrators, support the victims and drive out the culture of corruption. That is clearly timely, given what we have seen in recent weeks and months. It is difficult to measure the impact of corruption, but the scale has never been more obvious: the FIFA scandal, the Unaoil leaks and the recent Panama papers gave us a glimpse of the far-reaching and egregious damage that bribery, fraud, grand corruption and tax evasion can cause. As the Prime Minister said last July, “Corruption is one of the greatest enemies of progress in our time.”

Bribes, tax evasion and grand corruption destabilise development, keep the vulnerable in poverty, add significantly to the cost of doing business and fund terrorism. We all agree that we need to find a way of fixing those things.

Next week’s extraordinary summit is outside the usual gamut of United Nations, G20, G7 or even OECD processes. It is a one-off, stand-alone, unique summit, and we are all keen to understand how any actions that are agreed can be enforced. We do not want just warm words next week; real action must result from them.

It is right that the UK takes the lead on this issue, because we are uniquely exposed to corruption. Our status as a pre-eminent global financial centre and the unfortunate financial secrecy touted by our overseas territories and Crown dependencies make the UK seem a safe haven for the proceeds of corruption and the individuals and organisations that facilitate and benefit from financial crime and tax evasion. We ought to recognise that.

When MPs go around the world and look at the issues that developing countries face, we often think, “Isn’t it great that we’re not suffering from that level of day-to-day corruption? We don’t have to bribe public officials to get the service we want. We are not at risk of being stopped by the police and being asked for a charge to keep driving.” But the UK is not completely corruption-free. As a big financial centre, we are very exposed to corruption, and we are used as a way to launder money and hide the proceeds of corruption and crime elsewhere in the world.

It is right that we praise what the Government have done in that regard. We will soon be one of the first countries in the world, and the first in the European Union, to have a public register of beneficial ownership. That is a real step forward, which will allow us all to see who owns the companies that operate in the UK. I am sure that it will give us some extremely useful and interesting information. We all welcome the recent consultation on extending that transparency to property ownership. We also welcome the new anti-money laundering action plan, which, if fully implemented, will bolster the regulators’ enforcement powers and their ability to identify and freeze suspicious transactions.

Of course, we have issues with our overseas territories, and if we cannot convince them to get on board with this agenda, our reputation for being a truly anti-corruption jurisdiction will not be intact. As the Panama papers show, secret company ownership makes most cases of large-scale corruption, money laundering and terrorist financing possible. Without secrecy, much of that could not be done.

A World Bank review of more than 200 of the biggest corruption cases between 1980 and 2010 found that more than 70% relied on shadow entities that hide ownership. Sadly, company service providers in the UK and the Crown dependencies are second on the list of providing the shell entities that facilitate those awful crimes. This summit and our international reputation will prevail only if we secure commitments from all our overseas territories and dependencies to introduce public registers of beneficial ownership and strip companies of the secrecy that allows them to hide the proceeds of crime, corruption and tax evasion.

Success will depend on whether we tackle the risks that are somewhat closer to home. Trillions of pounds flow through the UK’s financial system every year, and sadly some of those transactions are less than clean. The National Crime Agency recently estimated that tens to hundreds of billions of pounds-worth of corrupt and illicit funds are laundered through the UK each year. Last week, the acting chief executive of the Financial Conduct Authority appeared before the Treasury Committee, and when asked whether the UK system is suitably hostile to money launderers, she could only reply, “We could do better.” Clearly, we could and must do better. The laundered funds that are used to buy property here get into the system through the secrecy that our overseas territories allow. It is harder to spot
and stop such funds once they are in the system, so we need to prevent them from getting there in the first place.

We must tackle money laundering in the UK. We welcome the action plan, but having 27 different institutions to supervise the anti-money laundering rules in the bodies that they regulate is far too many. They cannot have a real picture of what is going on, what action is needed, the trends and who is not complying. Will the Minister say whether the Government plan to find a way to reduce the number of supervisors, so that we can be confident that the new rules and those that are already in place will be enforced?

Law enforcement authorities identify three sectors that do not adequately report suspicious activity: the legal sector, accountancy and estate agency. Property ownership is a topical issue, and the fact that only 0.05% of all suspicious activity reports came from estate agents in 2013-14 suggests that action is needed to make that sector transparent. Recent research from Transparency International and investigations from Global Witness show how London’s property market is used for corrupt ends. More than 36,000 properties in London are owned by companies registered in offshore jurisdictions, and almost 10% of the properties in Westminster are owned by anonymous companies. We clearly cannot allow that situation to continue.

Anonymity has a clear link to corruption. More than 75% of corruption cases involving property investigated by the Metropolitan police’s proceeds of corruption unit involved anonymous companies registered in secrecy jurisdictions, 78% of which were registered in the UK’s overseas territories or Crown dependencies. This huge problem is sadly centred in territories over which we have some influence, so it is imperative that we produce some action from them.

Senior figures at the National Crime Agency have reported that corrupt investment in London’s most expensive properties is driving up house prices across the board. So money laundering not only is a problem for the rich and powerful, but has an impact on everyday life here in London. The longer we allow London to be a kleptocrats’ playground, the worse off we are making ordinary people.

We have all those statistics to recount, and an APG inquiry is ongoing at which we have heard many anecdotes about how British firms working overseas are losing out on contracts to unscrupulous firms based in countries that do not have the same regulations and rules, and do not play fair, as we do. We are losing jobs and income here, because other countries around the world are not following the rules that they ought to be. It is right for us to make a stand. We do not want businesses bribing their way into contracts around the world. Where we find that happening, businesses and their executives will be punished, and serious action will be taken. We will not turn a blind eye to it. Recently, Ernst and Young’s 2016 global fraud survey of senior executives found that 98% of UK respondents believed that it was important to know who ultimately owns and controls the entities with which they do business. So this is not a minority interest; the business world agrees that we should all know about such things.

Turning to the summit next week, will the Minister confirm exactly which countries are attending and the level of their representation? How many of the overseas territories and Crown dependencies will be present? Perhaps he will list which ones will not be. According to the recent statement, the two territories that had not agreed to have even a closed register of official ownership were Guernsey, which had some excuse to do with having elections and so could not agree—has any progress been made?—and Anguilla. Has any sense prevailed in that small part of the world? Has it seen the light?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): I will try to answer the broader questions at the end, but I can confirm that Anguilla has signed up. Guernsey’s election was last week, so we expect discussions to begin in earnest very promptly.

Nigel Mills: At least we have all the territories over that first hurdle.

Next week, the important thing will be to get real commitments on beneficial ownership and a timeframe for the register to be transparent and public, so everyone can see who owns every company established in a jurisdiction. For law-enforcement providers to be able to find such information in a timely way may be of some use, but we also want everyone to be able to search the register—for example, campaign groups could trace right through the system and see who owns properties. I suspect that law enforcement does not have the resources, sadly, to do that proactively, whereas sunlight and transparency will give us far more progress than a closed register ever could.

Will the Minister confirm whether the summit agenda includes discussion of a certain time by which all those territories will have a publicly accessible register of who owns companies and, preferably, of trusts in the jurisdiction? I accept that trusts are more complicated, but we need to see some progress on them as well.

Last autumn, I attended a meeting at which the Government’s anti-corruption champion, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles)—sadly, he cannot be present today—confirmed that the Prime Minister was pretty determined to get overseas territories on board with a public register. The words the anti-corruption champion used were “through legislation, guidance or naked pressure”.

I am not sure whether the summit counts as guidance or naked pressure, but if those do not work, what other options do the Government have? My right hon. Friend said “legislation”—his word—so will the Government put that on the table? At some point, will they take action if the territories will not go as far as we want them to, or is that completely off the table?

What other major countries are turning up? Are the Americans sending anyone next week, because they clearly have an important role to play in sorting out the world financial system? Those of us who would like to see greater action on global tax avoidance realise that the Americans have a real and vital role in that situation, so are they turning up next week?

If some actions are agreed next week and, as we hope, they are specific and have a real timeframe, how will they be enforced? Presumably, there will be no binding global agreement, but are the Government conscious of
that? We do not want to hear warm words and promises that have been made before, followed by years of drift; we want real, concrete actions that are reviewed, with a timescale and ways to enforce progress.

If there is an agreement next week and some territories subsequently resist from it, what actions will the Government propose to convince the territories otherwise? It is not encouraging to see the Government announce that everyone has agreed to a closed register, and then senior people from some of our overseas territories glory in being able to say, “We’ve won. We’ve got everything we wanted out of this,” implying that it will be business as usual—presumably, not what we were aiming for. We want any agreement next week to be meaningful and strong, not just hot air.

With those thoughts, I wish the Government and the Minister well at the summit next week. We hope that they will come out with a strong and binding agreement, which can take the agenda forward towards finding ways of materially reducing the amount of corrupt money that flows around the world, especially into the UK. Nations around the world should, rightly, keep the money that they earn and have the tax revenues necessary to grow their economies. Everyone throughout the world should be able to see our financial system moving in the direction of being open, transparent and honest, rather than corrupt.

9.46 am

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) and my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on securing today’s debate.

I welcome the Government’s commitment to tackling corruption and the leadership shown by the Prime Minister; but for this to end up as more than a public relations stunt, the Government need to take serious action. I want to focus on three issues: tax havens and the proposals on beneficial ownership registers; properties that are owned in the UK through shell companies that have been established in tax havens; and Britain’s own assets—whether in companies, trusts or other entities—is transparency about who owns them?

By agreeing to what is not really a register but a secret platform. And it certainly will not be available publically or that the Government mean what they say about tackling corruption, because developing countries have even fewer resources and are less capable of seeing whether they can access such information.

I say to the Minister that it is perfectly possible for us to insist that the overseas territories and Crown dependencies compile public registers of beneficial ownership. We have intervened on other issues, and if we are serious about tackling corruption, we should intervene on this issue. In a previous time, the Conservatives intervened through an Order in Council to ban capital punishment, and Labour, when it was in office, intervened through an Order in Council to outlaw discrimination on the grounds of sexuality. The UK public will believe that the Government mean what they say about tackling corruption only if they choose to use the powers available
to them through the Privy Council to enforce transparency. The first issue I ask the Minister to comment on is whether he will do that—and if not, why not?

The second issue is the scandal at our own doorstep of the way money is laundered into the UK property market. Again, the data and research here are substantial. In a 2015 paper, Transparency International found that £180 million of property that is thought to have been bought with laundered money since 2004 is currently being investigated. It claims that that is the tip of the iceberg and, to go back to the first point, says that in three out of four of those cases, an offshore structure was used to hide the owner’s identity.

Transparency International also found in March 2015 that more than 40,000 properties in London alone were held by foreign companies and that 89% of them were held in secret tax havens such as the British Virgin Islands, Jersey, the Isle of Man and Guernsey. In 2014 the Evening Standard found 700 “ghost mansions” as it called them, worth about £3 billion, uninhabited in London. The Guardian looked at one street in Hampstead and found £350 million of vacant properties all owned by shell companies in tax havens and the brilliant investigations carried out by both Private Eye and Tax Justice Network found not only massive properties held in tax havens but that 120 former Crown Estate properties had ended up being owned in 14 tax havens. They established that one in six homes sold in Westminster and in Kensington and Chelsea in the three years before their 2015 report had been bought by offshore companies.

That is a scandal, which hikes up property prices here in London and distorts the housing market. Because that is at the top of the market, I am not sure whether that is taking away from many people in real housing need, but we therefore become the centre and focus of money laundering and bringing money into the London property market through shell companies in tax havens. The Minister and the Government are consulting on this issue, but we should insist on a publicly open register of ownership of all properties in London.

In the Minister’s proposals, he talks about potential fines and imprisonment provisions for those who do not provide information, but of course that is no good if the owner is sitting in the Cayman Islands or the British Virgin Islands. He therefore needs powers to confiscate property and bring it back on to the British housing market. That would be a much stronger power. In those proposals, is the Minister talking about properties acquired in the future? If so, what does he intend to do about the many current properties?

My third and final point is about our seriousness in fighting corruption, which must start with fighting corruption at home. It is interesting—I am sure the Minister noticed this—that the first three prosecutions brought under the Bribery Act 2010 were all against UK officials: one in the courts; one a taxi driver bribing a local government official to get a licence; and one an overseas student bribing a lecturer. Whenever I talk to people in other countries, I always feel nervous about the patronising, complacent attitude we show that we have got it all right at home. We have not. If we are to be serious about fighting corruption, we should start by establishing our own anti-corruption strategy in Britain. I am particularly concerned about the role of the financial institutions in the UK. Banks, advisers and all those people are focused here because of the strength of our financial sector, and they are the very institutions that are facilitating money laundering and helping the corruption that takes place internationally. We saw in the Panama papers that the UK was the second most popular place with which Mossack Fonseca did business. We saw that nearly 2,000 of the so-called enablers—the lawyers or advisers—were located here. We also saw that HSBC was one of the biggest banks involved in the transactions revealed in those papers and that Coutts was second to it. HSBC was used 2,000 times and Coutts was used 500 times. I have argued before, and will argue again, that if the Government are serious about fighting corruption and limiting the role of all those advisers and banks in facilitating it, they ought to introduce a new offence on the advisers and banks and not just look at the culprits. It is the advisers who devise the schemes, and if we could cut that off at the root, we would not have problems later.

The rumoured proposal for the Serious Fraud Office to come under political control via the National Crime Agency at the Home Office is another concern. If we are serious about setting an example in the fight against corruption, we should not allow the Home Secretary to direct SFO investigations. Of course, proper resourcing—whether of the SFO or HMRC—is vital.

I was disturbed at the recent accusation from David Normington about the politicisation of public appointments. Corruption may be too strong a word, but this example, which comes from the Minister’s Department, shows how much we need to do at home to get our own house in order. David Normington accused Ministers of seeking to dismantle the existing system for making senior appointments to public bodies. He specifically accused the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport of trying to fill a prominent position in the National Portrait Gallery with a Conservative. None of the five applicants deemed suitable by Ministers for the job had been put through for interview, although four of the five had substantial connections with the Conservative party, and the Secretary of State therefore refused to accept officials’ recommendations.

It is very disturbing to see the ConservativeHome website actively encouraging Conservative supporters to apply for key public appointments. That may be a little thing, but it is symbolic. If the Government are going to lead the fight against corruption in the world, they have to start by putting their own house in order. The summit next week is an opportunity for action. I hope that it does not turn into an exercise in public relations. The decision on which way we go is in the Government’s hands.

10.2 am

DAMIAN COLLINS (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): This is a massive topic that will provoke a huge amount of interest today and in Parliament next week. I want to confine my remarks to corruption in global sport, which has been one of the major global corruption issues that we have debated and confronted over the past few years. I have been involved in this area through my work on the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport and as co-founder of the New FIFA Now group, which has campaigned alongside excellent organisations that care...
about the integrity of sport, such as Transparency International UK, for greater openness and transparency in the way global sports bodies are run, and in particular for reform of major organisations such as FIFA.

On the FIFA corruption scandal, I recall the exact words issued by the US Department of Justice in its indictment against FIFA, published last year. It said that corruption at FIFA was “rampant, systemic, and deep-rooted”.

The scale of the investigation so far and the number of arrests and indictments against senior officials in FIFA underlines the breadth, and what will come in time to be seen as the depth, of corruption within that global sporting body.

As with other areas of corporate corruption, the causes of corruption within sports organisations are reasonably clear and simple to understand. Corruption in sport is an important issue, and it is not only a question of the integrity of sporting competitions and the people who take part in them. That is important in its own right, but we have to recognise that serious criminal elements have used the opportunities that sport presents to move money all around the world, be it through laundering money through the football transfer system or people acquiring stakes and interests in clubs before seeking to hide their identity behind shell companies held overseas. That has been a major problem for a number of years, and the major corruption scandal at FIFA and in other sports has brought it to the forefront.

The reasons why corruption occurs are relatively easy to understand when there are organisations with poor internal governance, led by a group of people who are not really accountable to anyone else and who base themselves in hard-to-reach places, with little scrutiny of the way they use their money and power. If we look at the breadth of allegations of corruption against FIFA officials, they have largely been about people using the organisation’s resources to enrich themselves by taking a cut of contracts, broadcasting rights and marketing rights, or by using their power and wealth to buy the votes of other people in order to secure positions of prominence for themselves and their friends and even to determine where the World cup final is played.

There is not only a lack of transparency within FIFA and how it uses its resources; there is also a lack of any real opportunity for people within the organisation who have a concern to blow the whistle. There is nowhere for them to go, because they are largely making their complaints to the people who control the organisation and who, on the whole, are not that interested in those complaints.

During the FIFA scandal in 2011, David Triesman, a former Foreign Office Minister and the former chairman of the Football Association, who had been intimately involved in leading England’s bid to host the World cup championships in the process leading up to the voting for where the tournament should be played in 2010, used parliamentary privilege to lay before the Culture, Media and Sport Committee allegations of corruption against senior football officials such as Jack Warner, Ricardo Teixeira and Nicolas Leoz, suggesting that they had solicited bribes. Lord Triesman claimed that Jack Warner had asked the FA to pay him a sum of money to secure the rights to show World cup football matches in major stadiums in Haiti to people who had been affected by a recent earthquake. It transpired that Jack Warner was asking for payments from the FA for rights he already owned in an attempt to solicit money for himself personally, with the understanding that if he received that money, he might vote for England to win the right to host the World cup.

That is an example of information we have received. In the case of Lord Triesman’s allegations, which were dismissed at the time by FIFA and not taken seriously enough, the people he alleged were guilty of being involved in corrupt practices have subsequently been indicted by the FBI as part of its investigation. That poses the question: why did the Serious Fraud Office not do more at the time to investigate thoroughly the allegations that Lord Triesman put into the public domain? Are the resources available to ensure that such investigations can take place? Could more be done to reach out to other law enforcement agencies around the world in order to share intelligence and information where a suggestion of wrongdoing is put before the offices in this country?

Sharing of information and international co-operation is important. While it may well be more appropriate for a different international or national authority to take the lead in an investigation, we can still play a very important role in following up on it. I am concerned that there have been occasions in the past when whistleblowers have come forward with information but there has not been follow-through or action on it, and years have been lost that could have been spent going after the wrongdoers and taking a stand against them.

I want to use this opportunity to raise an example that relates to an allegation that was made in the course of the recent FIFA presidential elections but could not be discussed in public because of the action of the lawyers representing Sheikh Salman of Bahrain, who was a candidate for the FIFA presidency. This is an important illustration of the sort of case that needs to be discussed publicly and examined carefully by people who care about issues of corruption. There was a suggestion that Sheikh Salman had colluded with Sheikh Ahmad, who is head of the Olympic Council of Asia and a member of the FIFA executive committee and the International Olympic Committee, so that Sheikh Ahmad could use his financial position as head of the OCA to channel money to football associations in Asia in order to persuade them to vote for Sheikh Salman in the 2013 elections for the presidency of the Asian Football Confederation.

I would like to run through an exchange of emails between the various parties involved, to give an example of the sort of case that should be followed through and examined more closely. In this case, the Football Federation of the Kyrgyz Republic was in email contact with the Olympic Council of Asia. Sheikh Ahmad, the Kuwaiti head of the OCA since 1991, is a sporting kingmaker and a key powerbroker in Asia who is a close friend and associate of Sheikh Salman. The FFKR voted for Sheikh Salman in the AFC election on 2 May 2013, which he won by a landslide. On 26 April 2013, the FFKR’s executive director, Dastan Konokbaev, wrote to the private email address of the OCAs IT manager, Amer Elamani, with details of flights that the FFKR’s delegation would be taking to and from Kuala Lumpur for the AFC vote. Addressing him as “Brother”, he listed the flights he would be taking with the president, Semetei...
Sultanov, and the vice-president of the organisation. On the previous day, he had sent an email with his security mobile number, saying, “it is available any time”, and wrote, “this is my private email”. Mr Elalami replied from his personal account with the signature, “IT Manager, Olympic Council of Asia”, and his own phone number. He wrote: “Noted brother, will keep in touch, just let me know if required any assistance from our side”.

On 29 April 2013, three days before the vote, Mr Konokbaev emailed Mr Elalami at his private email address listing 53 projects and requesting the OCA’s financial support. The subject heading of the email was “About support for Kyrgyzstan football”. These projects included training camps, friendly matches, more than 300 air fares and the construction of a sports centre. The total value of the projects amounted to millions of pounds.

There seems to be no legitimate reason for the FFKR, which is part of FIFA, to seek funding from the OCA. The OCA’s IT manager had no grant-giving role and was using his private email address rather than his official one. Despite this, Mr Konokbaev wrote: “Brother, I hope you are well! I would like to acquaint you with our plans for 2013 (here included preparatory cycle Kyrgyzstan’s National Team) and indicate where you need support. He continued: “We have previously discussed, and even decide[d] many issues”. Mr Elalami forwarded the email on to the OCA’s director general, a former pilot he referred to as “captain”. Mr Al-Musallam is Sheikh Ahmad’s right-hand man and the pair work closely together. Mr Elalami appears to have believed that Mr Al-Musallam was already aware of this request for funds, writing: “Did you receive this email from Dastan?”, and seeking advice on how to respond. He continued: “They send a financial support till March next year, what I should reply. Please advise”. The emails also show that Sheikh Ahmad, Mr Al-Musallam and Mr Elalami were among a 19-strong OCA delegation in Kuala Lumpur for the vote. Bizarrely, the OCA did not have accreditation from the AFC. Instead, it was accredited to football associations.

In a document headed “list of delegates—KL”, which was circulated among OCA officials, Mr Elalami’s name appeared alongside “KYR”, which is believed to mean Kyrgyzstan, in the “accreditation” column. Mr Elalami is a Kuwaiti who had no formal association with the FFKR. In 2009, the OCA had requested accreditation for the AFC Congress but, after being refused this, set up offices nearby and hosted a reception for 30 or so football associations on the day before a vote in which Sheikh Salman unsuccessfully stood for a position on FIFA’s executive committee. On 6 May, the day after flying back from the 2013 vote, the FFKR’s executive director sent a further email to Mr Elalami reminding him of the projects that needed funding. He said: “Earlier, I sent you an email “describing our needs and as you can see, there are issues that need to be addressed in the next few days [now] that all went according to plan”.

Beneath the projects he wrote: “Which way you help? How much? Period of time?” In some cases, he asked how the FFKR would be paid—“by bank transfer” or “in Kuwait”.

These issues warrant further investigation. In this case there is no direct proof that money changed hands between the OCA and this particular football association, but it is curious and suggests that there could be people who abuse their position in global sport to support each other, reward each other and share money between each other as a currency to secure political support. But where does anyone go with such allegations? Where can a whistleblower turn to ensure the proper investigation of such allegations? This has been at the heart of many corruption issues in sport.

Looking to the anti-corruption summit particularly, how can we ensure a gold standard for organisations operating in the sporting world to ensure they comply with high standards in auditing the way their money is used? There are questions for big global accountancy firms such as KPMG, which has audited FIFA’s accounts for many years. Despite its auditing of those accounts, it was possible for Sepp Blatter to pay Michel Platini 2 million Swiss francs, although that money was not accounted for in FIFA’s accounts. How can that be possible? How can major companies that work with global organisations sign off accounts if there concerns about them? What sort of faith can we have in that auditing process?

What sort of auditing is there? What sort of transparency is there in the way money and resources are used, and what sort of enforcement can be taken when there is a problem? Should there be a green light system for global organisations to say there are concerns about the lack of transparency in the organisation? Other commercial partners, whether sponsors or broadcasters that work with those organisations, should be mindful of those concerns when transacting with that organisation or seeking to do business with them.

Do we need some form of specialist unit in the National Crime Agency to look at sports corruption? There is a real problem with a lack of investigators working in this area. The Select Committee recently took evidence from the Tennis Integrity Unit, which has just two investigators looking at problems, largely involving gambling, and allegations of match fixing in tennis. I believe that FIFA had four people in its investigation unit. The UK’s Anti-Doping Agency has one person in its investigation unit.

Do we need greater resources for work across different sports and based in the NCA that can look at allegations of corruption in sport and act on them? Perhaps we need a unit of four or five officers working in the NCA and dedicated to looking at sports corruption, working with global sports governing bodies, having a direct relationship with their own internal integrity units and seeking to co-operate with the FBI and other investigatory bodies around the world. That additional resource would be welcome—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. I am becoming a bit worried about time. Given that we had long speeches by Back Benchers, it is only fair not to restrict
Front Benchers. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will start to bring his speech to a close and perhaps the next speaker will please keep an eye on the clock.

**Damian Collins:** I will wrap up.

Can we look at the way the NCA works and at its resources? Working with overseas territories has been an important question in the FIFA corruption scandal. Jeff Webb is one of the people indicted by the FBA and is based in the Cayman Islands. How easy is it for us here to request information from the Cayman Islands about people we are concerned about and who may have links with sports corruption scandals? I welcome what the Government have said about access to a register and I am interested to hear how the Minister believes that will change our ability to pursue such cases.

10.16 am

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): As chair and co-founder of the all-party corruption group, chair of the parliamentary friends of Cafod group, and a long-standing advocate for anti-corruption efforts, may I say that it is a pleasure to speak in today’s debate? I congratulate the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) on securing it. It is important and timely. Hon. Members have made important speeches and I look forward to the Minister’s response to the questions that have been raised.

As we have heard, the forthcoming anti-corruption summit presents a unique opportunity for world leaders, business and civil society to come together and advance the international transparency and the anti-corruption agenda in a way that we have not seen for years. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we are not here to criticise the Government, because we welcome the summit and the efforts made in that regard. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) powerfully made clear, if we are going to call on the rest of the world to take action, we must get our own house in order.

Last summer, the Prime Minister said in Singapore: “I’m determined that the UK must not become a safe haven for corrupt money from around the world...there is no place for dirty money in the UK. Since 2004, over £180 million of property in the UK has been brought under criminal investigation as a suspected proceeds of corruption; over 36,000 properties are held by offshore companies based in tax havens—a point made by my right hon. Friend—and in 2011 alone, £3.8 billion of UK property was bought by companies registered in the British Virgin Islands. If we hope to see progress at the UK property was bought by companies registered in the British Virgin Islands. If we hope to see progress at the

The UK can lead by example in other areas, but what more can we do here at home on enforcement? The hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) asked whether our enforcement agencies do enough. My key question is: do they have the right resources and legislative framework to do all they can to stamp down on corruption?

One of the first issues I want to raise is how we hold companies criminally liable for actions of their employees that facilitate corruption, tax evasion, money laundering and fraud. I have spoken about that previously. I have pressed various Ministers and the Prime Minister on the issue because, astonishingly, the UK remains one of the most popular places for the facilitation of all forms of corruption. The Panamanian firm Mossack Fonseca, of recent Panama papers fame, worked with almost 2,000 professional enablers in the UK—accountants, estate agents and lawyers—to set up companies, foundations and trusts, all or some of which could potentially have been used to launder money or facilitate illicit financial flows. The UK was the second most popular place for Mossack Fonseca to operate in. I do not think that is an achievement of which the Prime Minister is particularly proud.

Many factors are involved, but one key issue in the UK is the law on corporate criminal liability. Under UK law, it is extremely difficult to hold a company criminally liable for the actions of its employees in terms of corrupt acts or any similar offence. To do so, prosecutors have to prove who is the “controlling mind” of the company, with direct knowledge of those acts. Our law enforcement agencies, including the Serious Fraud Office, have raised the issue time and again. The SFO director, David Green, has said: “That is difficult because inevitably the email trail tends to dry up at middle management and evidently it is hard to prove.”

There is a potential solution. The Bribery Act 2010, introduced by the last Labour Government, sets a more reasonable evidential threshold for prosecuting companies where their employees have been involved in acts of bribery. It requires companies to prove that they have taken “adequate” steps within their organisation to prevent employees from committing such acts. The SFO secured its first prosecution and conviction for that new “failure to prevent” offence last December, and we understand that more prosecutions are on the way.

The Government recognise the effectiveness of the offence, because the Prime Minister recently announced, in the wake of the Panama papers revelations, that he would legislate to create a similar offence in respect of tax evasion, but he needs to go further and apply the new law to all forms of economic crime. I strongly urge the Minister, as I did a Treasury Minister two weeks ago, to look closely at part 2 of schedule 17 to the Crime and Courts Act 2013, because it contains an exhaustive list of offences, all of which cause immense harm both abroad and at home—they range from false accounting and forgery to fraudulent trading, bribery and money laundering—to which the Government could easily apply the new offence. That would send a clear message to the rest of the world that criminal corporate behaviour will not be tolerated in the UK and that the full force of our criminal justice system will bear down on corporate wrongdoing wherever it is found. I am sure that the Minister would like to send that message. The Prime Minister recently committed to “consider carefully” that proposal when I put it to him during his statement on the Panama papers. It would be helpful if the Minister updated us on whether the Prime Minister has been able to do that as of yet.
Ahead of next week’s summit, the Government could also commit to ensuring that our law enforcement agencies across the board have the tools they need to properly tackle the facilitators and enablers of corruption in this country. I have mentioned the SFO. Under the Roskill model, it is charged with investigating and prosecuting the most serious and complex crimes, much of which falls under the umbrella of corruption. That unique model of investigating and prosecuting crime, all under one roof, has proved to be highly effective, yet doubts still linger about the SFO’s future. I hope the Minister will today give a reassurance that the SFO will be provided with the support and resources it needs over the long term. There is always a question mark hanging over its future and whether it will be absorbed into the NCA. It is important that the SFO is able to concentrate on these very important matters, not the least of which are the issues that the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe raised.

Another great weakness in the armoury of our law enforcement agencies is their ability to recover stolen assets or the proceeds of crime. As Transparency International has highlighted, the UK’s asset recovery regime has not been up to the job. It is estimated that £23 billion to £57 billion of dirty money is laundered in the UK each year, given London’s role as a global financial centre, second only to the US. Against that, the National Audit Office estimates that only 25p out of every £100 is confiscated from organised criminals; a significant proportion of that sum is likely to be the proceeds of corruption. It is therefore extremely welcome that the Government say in their “Action Plan for anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist finance” that they are considering new legal powers “to enable the quick and effective forfeiture of money held in bank accounts in cases where...there is suspicion that the funds are the proceeds of crime.”

Such powers are long overdue. In the light of that new impetus, can the Minister say whether asset recovery regimes will feature highly on the agenda of the Government’s summit next week? What aims do the Government have for increasing co-operation and joint working across national borders to ensure that those words on asset recovery are translated into action? At the end of the day, it is only through global co-operation and by demonstrating that there is nowhere to hide from law enforcement agencies that we will be able to disrupt and ultimately recover stolen assets and, hopefully, prevent this sort of crime.

I want to finish by reiterating a key point made by the hon. Member for Amber Valley and my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking: the central importance of public registers of beneficial ownership to the Government’s anti-corruption efforts. The Prime Minister himself said last September:

“If we’re to beat corruption, we need transparency.”

That means transparency over who owns properties, transparency over which companies own other companies and transparency over which individuals own those companies. It is simply not good enough for Ministers to accept assertions from overseas territories and Crown dependencies that providing access to beneficial ownership registers to law enforcement agencies alone is sufficient.

The OECD has estimated that tax havens may be costing developing countries a sum that is up to three times the size of the global aid budget. In a few weeks,
we are expected to debate the aid budget here in Westminster Hall. If people really want a reduction in global aid budgets, the money for resources to take people out of poverty in developing countries has to come from somewhere, and it has to come from developing countries being allowed to develop their own tax base. At the moment, the impact is there for all to see. A lack of infrastructure, development being held back, and weak health and education systems compound all the other development challenges that we so often hear about in Westminster Hall.

There is a particular challenge in the extractive industries. Addressing corruption in those industries must be a priority because a huge amount of resources and revenues for development is lost through bribery and corruption. In a sense, we are robbing some of the poorest countries in the world twice through a lack of accountability within the extractive industries: once when materials are extracted in poor labour conditions or in the shadow of conflict; and again when we allow tax to be dodged or profits to be siphoned off. Look at the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It should be one of the richest countries in the entire world—we all carry a little piece of the DRC around in our pockets in our mobile phones—but it is one of the poorest. Tackling those financial flaws is crucial and ought to be a key priority for the summit.

Probably the most repeated phrase today is that we must get our own house in order. It is correct that we are not immune here in the UK, and we have heard about money laundering in the property market. People have suggested—I will not make any specific accusations, as that would be completely out of order—that there is a correlation between donations to political parties and seats in the House of Lords, right at the very heart of our so-called democratic system. The examples that we set to the rest of the world, including soft power and systems of patronage in the UK, must be looked at.

Alternatives do exist. Look at how the Scottish Government have taken forward the tax powers that they have been given. They have also introduced general anti-avoidance rules, described by various commentators as one of the strongest measures in the European Union. The convener of the Tax Law Sub-Committee of the Law Society of Scotland, Isobel d’Inverno, said:

“The general anti-avoidance rule that we have got in the Scottish legislation is much fiercer than the UK one. It’s a very much firmer ‘Keep off the grass’ sign than the UK one is. Revenue Scotland also appears very determinated to collect all the tax that is due.”

It would be interesting to hear what discussions the Minister has had with his Scottish Government counterparts on that matter.

As we approach the EU referendum, it is worth reflecting on the benefits of EU membership to global anti-corruption efforts. The EU anti-money laundering directive launched in June 2015 has been a huge boost to international efforts and is one factor that has helped to drive the UK Government’s process of setting up beneficial ownership registers.

It falls to the UK Government to take action now and to show leadership through the summit. We have heard calls demanding action from the overseas territories in publishing beneficial ownership registers. We have also heard that there are precedents to do so, as the Government have previously required progress from the overseas territories. It would be useful to hear what the Government’s intentions are and whether they intend to set any kind of date for taking such steps.

The Government are in the process of reviewing the tax treaties they have with a number of developing countries. Scottish National party Members have spoken several times about the tax treaty with Malawi. It would be interesting to know how other tax treaties will be reviewed to ensure a fight against poverty and a fight against the flight of tax in an open and transparent way, and that extends to how we empower communities in developing countries to hold their own Governments to account.

It is important that the Department for International Development continues to support governance and civil society organisations to hold Governments to account and to ensure that they collect the tax they are due. It would be interesting to hear about that and about any other steps the Government will take, including on country-by-country reporting—requiring companies to publish the tax that they are paying in developing countries—especially regarding the extractive industries. Tax can be a key to unlocking resources in developing countries and a route out of poverty, and the summit is a chance for the Government to show leadership.
used for. Tax avoidance is when companies use procedures for things that they were not designed to be used for in order to avoid their liabilities—something that most people in this country never even get the chance to contemplate.

With regard to doing something about the problem, I echo the comments of others. The most important thing is that we need to be able to follow the money and see where it is, so transparency is vital. I welcome the fact that, from next month, we will have a public register of beneficial interests in this country. We will be able to see what companies in this country own in this country. However, large parts of the land in the Scottish highlands are owned by companies that are registered in the Bahamas and elsewhere, so the register will not assist me or anyone else in understanding the transparency of property and land ownership in the areas we represent.

The most important thing in this whole debate is that our dependent territories and overseas areas be compelled in some way to be transparent. After all, as the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) observed, the people that live in those areas are British citizens who also enjoy the protection and all the benefits of the Crown. Therefore, it is inconceivable that a situation can exist whereby the overseas territories and Crown dependencies are allowed to deprive Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs of monies that it should, rightfully, hope to get. It is vital that action be taken. My question for the Minister, above all others, is: what leverage or sanction will be applied to the Administrations in those areas to ensure that they do not frustrate the objectives that this Parliament has set itself? There have been times in the past when we have not been shy about taking action to compel, and we need to know that those areas will be discussed at the summit.

Many people have talked about this country getting its house in order. I agree that we should not be too complacent about the situation here. There are some aspects that have not yet been mentioned and that we might want to revisit, including HMRC’s arrangements with large multinational companies regarding their tax liability—for example, the deal that was done with Google. If we are talking about transparency, we still need to know the details of that. In the absence of the facts and figures, we have to assume that a deal has been done to allow a very rich multinational company to pay an effective corporation tax rate of 3%. Many people who run businesses in this country will look at that and wonder how it can be that one of the world’s richest companies is charged 3% on its profits in the UK when they are paying many times that rate.

My hon. Friend also observed that we need to consider the general anti-avoidance rules. He is right that the Scottish GAAR has been lauded by many independent commentators as a stricter and more effective set of regulations than exist in the UK as a whole. The irony is that the Scotland Act 2016 will still cover only a minority of taxation and regulation in that country, but the UK Government could learn much from Scotland’s GAAR about toughening up the regulations.

Perhaps the Brexit debate is the elephant in the room. Much has been achieved in recent years at European level, through the EU, on anti-laundering legislation. I accept that, in theory, if we were to leave the EU, it would be possible to make bilateral or multilateral arrangements with other countries to try to do something about tax avoidance, but in the short term, and for an undefined period, the holes in the regulatory net would be widened if Brexit were achieved, so we need to consider the implications. Finally on putting our own house in order, there is still much more to be done on deploying resources and specialists to investigate malpractice, so I would like the Minister to talk about beefing up our capacity.

My final point is on leadership. As others have said, the Prime Minister has done a lot, but there is still more to do. For example, I would like a little more transparency on whether he has had any benefit from his father-in-law’s company that owns large parts of Jura, where the Prime Minister decided to holiday in 2015. More information on that would be welcome.

There has been a distraction in recent months. We debated this subject a couple of months ago, when everyone was having a feeding frenzy to get Ministers and MPs to publish their tax returns. Of course, it became apparent that, if anyone was up to no good, the last place we would find evidence of it is on a tax return. What we really need to know is the information that does not appear on tax returns. As Members of Parliament, we are in a position of trust as legislators. We are the custodians of the arrangements that our citizens have to follow, and we need to be beyond reproach. We need to register our interests in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, and we need to consider whether Members should register any interests in offshore countries where they may be benefiting from the loopholes that we are trying to close.

The anti-corruption summit offers an opportunity for the Government to demonstrate global leadership. There are many decent people in this country who pay their taxes and who have never thought about doing anything else, and they are looking to the Government to do something about this massive international problem.
play in this Parliament on pushing these issues. Parliament is so much the better for her being here and for her work, and we are all grateful to her.

The hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) made an interesting contribution, and he has shown great tenacity in pursuing corruption in sport. I hope that he continues to pursue those issues, and I look forward to seeing where his inquiries take him. There was much in his speech that is of concern to us all, and I hope that, if not this Minister, Ministers in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport will respond to him adequately. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) mentioned some of the issues that I will particularly address in my brief contribution, especially on the developing world.

There is consensus on both sides of the House on the importance of addressing corruption, and we would all agree with the Prime Minister and his strategy when he reminds us that corruption harms societies, undermines economic development and threatens democracy. In the past, he talked about the golden thread of conditions that allow countries to thrive, and the absence of corruption is one of those conditions. The Opposition welcome the summit because, as has been said many times in this debate, some campaigners estimate that illegal tax evasion, corrupt deals for natural resources and money laundering cause between $100 billion and $2 trillion worth of money to flow out of developing countries every year. Estimates suggest that corruption equates to more than 5% of global GDP. The World Economic Forum’s analysis shows that corruption increases the cost of doing business by up to 10%, and it suggests that cutting corruption by just 10% could benefit the global economy by nearly $400 billion a year.

We welcome the summit, which is an opportunity for the Government to show leadership, as many Members have said. The summit meets against the backdrop of the Panama papers. Indeed, the full details of the papers will be released just three days before the summit. Surely, the test for the summit in the eyes of the public will now be how it responds to the issues raised by the Panama papers. There has been widespread revulsion at the revelations, which is understandable, and many people are interested in the impact of the Panama papers on our domestic scene and in the political fallout from the Prime Minister’s tax returns and the way that he had to come to Parliament and from the number of Tory party donors caught up in the Panama papers.

Interesting though that is, and we all accept that the Government probably still have more to answer for, for me the biggest issue raised by the Panama papers was the revelation of chronic corruption that has helped people to siphon billions of pounds from Africa, stealing from some of the globe’s very poorest people. Africa is a continent rich in natural resources, yet its people are poor because, too often, foreign investment has been channelled through offshore centres such as the British Virgin Islands. Fortunes are being made and siphoned from Africa, rather than being spent on the schools, hospitals and infrastructure needed across the continent. Surely, it is obscene that, for example, a Jersey-based oil company can instruct Mossack Fonseca to shift its registration from the Bahamas to Mauritius, to avoid more than £280 million in tax on the sale of an oilfield in Uganda—£280 million is more than the Ugandan Government will spend this year on health services.

Surely, it is a disgrace when major mining concessions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are acquired at seemingly below market rates and sold on for $1.4 billion, which is almost double the combined annual budgets for health and education in a country with one of the world’s highest child mortality rates, by taking advantage of such offshore accounts.

Surely, the test for the summit now is how the UK deals with its overseas territories and Crown dependencies. As has been said throughout the debate, the Prime Minister has previously pledged to introduce a fully public register, and he has previously written to the overseas territories demanding such a register. I will not run through all the quotations because of time, but last year in Singapore he said “when you have companies whose ownership isn’t known you allow a shroud of secrecy behind which people can do bad things, sometimes terrible things, with no accountability.”

On the overseas territories and Crown dependencies, he went on to boast that he would “take concrete steps to force the pace.”

Sadly, those concrete steps have been smashed up. Just two months ago, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury said that the overseas territories and Crown dependencies are “not committed” to a public register of beneficial ownership:

“The United Kingdom is leading the way in respect of a public register of beneficial ownership, but other countries, including the overseas territories, are not committed to that.”—[Official Report, 1 March 2016, Vol. 606, c. 815.]

As many Members have said, is now not the time for the Government to insist that the overseas territories and Crown dependencies take the action necessary? To what extent will that be on the agenda for the summit, and will the summit agree a timetable to force those jurisdictions to publish central public registers of beneficial ownership? Not to do so would surely mean that the summit fails the test set for it by reasonable people. As the hon. Member for Amber Valley asked, which overseas territories and Crown dependencies will attend the summit?

Very quickly—I appreciate that the Minister will address this—I appreciate that the Minister will want time to sum up—as well as action on beneficial ownership, which is vital, we want action on tax reporting. It has been disappointing, given the summit’s aims and the Chancellor’s stated support, that past proposals in the European Parliament calling for published country-by-country reporting by companies of the details of where they earn their money and pay taxes have been defeated by Conservative MEPs. Does he not agree that it is now time for the Government to deliver on their promise to introduce country-by-country reporting for multinational companies, and can he tell us what progress will be made on that at the summit? My right hon. Friend the Member for Barking discussed money laundering. I will not go over that because of time, but again, will the Minister respond to those issues and detail what response we can expect at the summit?

The Minister has been asked a number of questions that I hope he can answer. As I said, we welcome the summit. We want concrete action on registers with respect to overseas territories and Crown dependencies. The Government can take action. There is a degree of consensus across the House, but when Governments tolerate large-scale tax avoidance by big corporations and the wealthy and fail to address legitimate concerns about tax havens, it is our constituents, public services
and some of the poorest people in the world who suffer. If we refuse to act, we create the conditions for the inaction of others. The Government have an opportunity to show leadership at the summit; they must not squander it.

10.52 am

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): Sir Edward, it is always a pleasure to have you in charge, ensuring that we behave ourselves during our debates. I join the chorus of plaudits for my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) and the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), who have done so much to raise the issue as co-chairs of the all-party group on anti-corruption. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley for organising this debate.

We have had a series of extremely carefully considered and very wide-ranging speeches, not only from a former Chair of the Select Committee on Public Accounts—you are one yourself, Sir Edward—but from members of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport and many others. The debate shows the breadth of concern and the issues into which the tentacles of corruption can spread—everything from sport to international aid to public contracts and property ownership in Baker Street, among other places in this country and elsewhere.

I think that there is cross-party agreement that it is important for us all to remember—although I am pleased by and welcome everybody’s recognition that the Prime Minister and others have been instrumental in taking forward the agenda—that there is a great deal more to do. The effects of corruption are not felt only in other countries. My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley was right to say that, although we may be blessedly free of some of the more commonplace and in-your-face forms of petty corruption, such as people demanding bribes for everyday public services, that does not mean that any society, ours included, is safe.

The effects are widespread and pernicious. Corruption raises the costs of doing business, through bribes and friction costs. That is true not only in the UK but for our exporters trying to get contracts and trying to win jobs for our workers in exporting overseas, and consumers must put up with poorer quality goods, because if goods are purchased through a corrupt process, the chances are that they will be second best, either in quality or in value for money. Again, everybody suffers. Corruption drives up prices, not just in the UK—we heard the example of property prices here—but around the world as well. Most importantly, it is a fundamentally unjust way to run not only a country but global society in general. People cannot be sure that what they see on their TV screens and hear from their leaders or, indeed, their bosses is correct or fair. We are talking about a piece of social justice, so there is a huge amount to do.

In the limited time left, I will try to respond to some of the points raised, although I want to leave a couple of moments for my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley to sum up. He asked specifically what would be on the agenda for the summit and precisely who would be there. I can give him some guidance on that, but obviously, these matters are still under discussion, so I cannot give him a running commentary. He rightly pointed out that the summit’s overall aims are to expose corruption, punish those who perpetrate it and drive out the culture of corruption.

We have had a number of submissions from Members about how, for example, asset recovery could be improved; the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) suggested confiscation, but other suggestions were made for other kinds of asset recovery as well. Suggestions were also made about better opportunities for whistleblowing and better governance in sport, which has been a potential channel for distributing ill-gotten gains around the world. All those things need to be discussed and will, I am sure, be on the agenda, but its precise details will be released nearer the time.

I can give my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley a little detail about who is invited. Again, the final guest list will be released nearer the time, but I can confirm that we have invited the G20 countries, leading international organisations in the field, including the UN, the World Bank, the OECD and the International Monetary Fund, and a wide range of other countries—I think this is where he was going; we will have more details, I am sure, as we get closer to the day—that are leading the fight against global corruption or have a pivotal role to play. I understand that John Kerry from the US will be there as well.

I should mention that there will be an event the day before with a broader invitation list, which will be run by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, for example. We will invite a number of companies and other non-governmental organisations, because there are many NGOs, companies and sectoral organisations that understand the reputational damage that corruption can cause. We must harness those who are willing to take a lead on the issue to set the right tone and take part in the three aims that I spoke of, particularly driving out corruption. Their co-operation and help will be essential in setting a tone for others to follow, not just in political leadership but in commercial and, potentially, third sector leadership as well. I hope that I have given my hon. Friend some extra detail. I am sure that more will come, and that he will want to hear more about it.

The right hon. Member for Barking asked whether we would be willing to use last resort powers. To summarise, they are a last resort. We do not want to have to use them; we want to ensure that people come as far as possible without any need for them. However, it is clear from all the submissions, suggestions and speeches that we have heard that there is a huge thirst and desire for the agenda to be taken further. We in this country are not unique in wanting to do so. We have taken some important leading steps, but we are far from the only ones who need to be involved, and far from the only ones who are. The issue needs to be taken forward on an international scale. The UK absolutely needs to play its part, and we have heard the reasons why we, particularly given our overseas and dependent territories, need to be a leading member of that international coalition.

This is clearly a developing agenda. The proposals and the progress made in the wake of the FIFA scandal, for example, show how much further international opinion has moved and still needs to move. The revelations in the wake of the Panama papers show how much further we can go and how much further public opinion, although...
it has moved, still needs to move. I am sure that this
topic will continue to develop and that the rules and
regulations and, most importantly, the ethos and culture
of international business, investment and ownership,
will continue to change and tighten. I am sure that
everybody in this room and more broadly will welcome
that on a cross-party basis, with open arms. I will leave a
few seconds for my hon. Friend to respond to the
debate.

10.59 am

Nigel Mills: I thank everyone who has taken part in
this debate for their excellent speeches. I think it is clear
to anyone watching that there is a strong consensus
among all the parties here that we want the summit next
week to be a success. We want strong action to be taken.
We want real agreements to take the issue forward, and
we want to ensure that things happen on a timely basis,
so that we do not just drift along and forget about the
issue in a few years. I wish the Minister and the Government
well with the summit, and we look forward to seeing
what actions are taken next week.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
The growing presence of extremist organisations and movements in Libya is deeply worrying. The lesson of Libya, like the lesson of Iraq, is that countries cannot just bomb somewhere and move on. Thanks to the work of the Library staff and my hon. Friend for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), we know that the UK Government spent 13 times more money on bombing Libya than on rebuilding it. Let us just consider those figures for a moment. The Library confirmed that £320 million was spent on military operations and bombing in Libya during NATO’s intervention in 2011. Meanwhile, separate UK Government figures show that a mere £25 million was spent on rebuilding infrastructure in the years following the war.

The legacy of that policy in Libya has meant that today we have a vacuum that is being filled by rival militias and a country that is struggling to provide for its desperate population. US intelligence agencies tell us that the number of Daesh fighters in Syria and Iraq has dropped to about 25,000 from a high of about 31,500. However, the number of Daesh fighters in Libya has roughly doubled in the same period to about 6,500.

The UK Government cannot shirk their responsibility to Libya. Leaving the country in a disastrous state after bombing it has undoubtedly created the conditions that Daesh needs to operate, as it terrorises local civilians and sets up home among the rubble of 2011. Indeed, the UK’s bombing of Syria—along with countless other military operations—is not defeating Daesh but merely displacing it across the wider region.

The UK Government’s involvement in Libya has been so catastrophic that even the US President himself has criticised the UK’s Prime Minister. During an interview in March, the President was forthright in his assessment of the military intervention in Libya, criticising the Prime Minister for the UK’s role in allowing Libya to degrade to its current state; in fact, the President used more colourful language than that. The President also suggested that the Prime Minister had taken his eye off Libya after being “distracted by a range of other things”.

The US President’s comments do not paint the picture of a UK Prime Minister who is either up to the job of leading our forces in strategic military interventions or capable of international co-operation in multi-faceted actions. The President went on to admit that Libya was the worst mistake of his presidency. The Prime Minister could do with reflecting on his own actions and admitting the catastrophic failures of his premiership regarding Libya.

On 19 April, the Foreign Secretary, freshly returned from his visit to Tripoli, announced £10 million of funding to support the new Libyan Government of national accord. This money includes £1.5 million to tackle illegal migration, smuggling and organised crime, and £1.8 million to support counter-terrorism activities. The new cash follows an £11.5 million payment last year for development and humanitarian assistance.

We in the SNP welcome that funding, but it is too little, too late. Despite urgent calls to provide humanitarian assistance to an estimated 2.4 million Libyans in need of aid, the Department for International Development has set aside just £50,000 in aid this financial year to prevent food and medicine shortages in the country.

Understandably, that has led to much criticism. A UN official has described the UK’s humanitarian efforts as “paltry bone-throwing from a European country whose bombers reaped so much destruction”.

The Government not only undertook military action with little in the way of long-term planning, but they have left the state and people of Libya paying a heavy price for that action. Humanitarian conditions in Libya have deteriorated since mid-2014, leaving an estimated 2.4 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, and some 1.28 million people across the country are at risk of food insecurity.

It has been widely reported that the Government are now preparing to deploy British troops in Libya. The Foreign Affairs Committee wrote to the Foreign Secretary about the prospect of Britain deploying 1,000 ground troops in training and security roles for the new Government of national accord in Tripoli, but the response it received was less than clear. The Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), accused the Foreign Secretary of “not dealing straightforwardly with Parliament” and went on to describe the “less-than-candid reply to my request for further detail on a rapidly developing situation that may require further active British engagement.”

That is hardly a ringing endorsement for a Government who are already struggling with their poor legacy in Libya.

Furthermore, a leaked memo from a confidential briefing to US members of Congress from King Abdullah of Jordan suggested that British SAS units are already operating in Libya. We urgently need honesty and transparency about the Government’s intentions in Libya. Our troops may soon be in Libya as part of training missions. How much of that training do the UK Government envisage taking place on Libyan soil? In 2013, the UK Government agreed to train up to 2,000 Libyan soldiers, who were part of the Libyan general purpose force, at Bassingbourn barracks near Cambridge. The first contingent arrived in 2014, but the programme was halted early after repeated allegations of disciplinary issues and of serious sexual assaults by Libyan personnel against civilians. The Government appear unclear whether they would again host Libyan training missions in the UK.

Will the Government ensure that a vote and full debate take place in the main Chamber before any deployment of UK troops on Libyan soil? The Prime Minister must seek approval from Parliament before deploying any UK forces and provide full disclosure of the Government’s plans. Given that Libya is extremely fragile, with numerous militias and the growing presence of Daesh, how do the Government envisage a training mission in Libya taking place?

We now know that NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, has ruled out any new combat operations, and that further highlights how unwise it would be for the UK to have any further military presence in Libya. The US President’s willingness even to partially admit he made a mistake is commendable, but only in that way will he and coalition partners learn from the errors of the past. It is time that the Prime Minister and his Government admitted their mistakes, and it is time that
the Prime Minister was up front to Parliament about his Government’s plans in Libya. We need less military posturing and more long-term stability planning for Libya.

I conclude by posing some questions to the Minister. When have the Government promised only £50,000 to the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, for humanitarian efforts? It has been said that Libya is a rich country, but surely that makes reconstruction efforts all the more important, so that in the future we can access that wealth. Will the Government be hosting any more Libyan training missions on UK soil, or does the Minister envisage that the new training missions will be held on Libyan soil? Where do the Minister and the Government stand on the deployment of 1,000 British troops to Libya, and will the Minister ensure that a full debate and a vote take place in the House before the deployment of UK troops on Libyan soil?

11.11 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is pleasure to work under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. Given your interest in the matter, I know that you would probably want to participate in the debate, but we are pleased to have you in your seat.

As is customary—but also because it is important to give recognition—I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson) on securing the debate. It is important that the House take a firm interest in the matter, not least for the reasons he has outlined. Events are changing on a regular basis, so I am pleased to have the opportunity to bring the House up to date with the events and with Britain’s involvement.

The hon. Gentleman will understand that I completely disagree with his interpretation of recent—the past few years’—history. He glosses over many of the key elements that, sadly, allowed Libya to slip backwards after we had parliamentary and prime ministerial elections after Gaddafi was removed, but I will come to that in due course.

We must recognise that Libya has gone through a testing period since 2011, but we must also place into context the backdrop against which events have taken place. Libya is a relatively new country. It has a huge amount of history, going back thousands and thousands of years. It is where the Berbers, the Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Romans and not least the Ottoman empire and the Italians were. We were there for a period as well. As a modern state, however, 1951 is when it gained its independence. Gaddafi took over after the coup and spent 40 years deterring societal development. Over the years, all the institutions had been able to learn, to adjust, to adapt and to further themselves, but that did not take place under Gaddafi. That is one of the reasons why, when the Arab spring came along, the people of Libya were asking for something very different. Once Gaddafi was removed, however, it was tough to suddenly create the institutions that were needed for the country to move forward. That was the challenge we faced in 2011.

UN Security Council resolution 1973, which was adopted in March 2011 and allowed Operation Ellamy to take place, represented a legitimate cause to move in and support the people of Libya, because Gaddafi had made it clear that after Benghazi—the bloodbath he attempted to orchestrate there—he would have moved on to other cities where other Libyans were rising up and saying, “I’ve had enough of this dictator. I want something else”. It was right, therefore, that our Prime Minister and other leaders around the world stepped up to the plate and did the proper thing. We can look back on that and say that it absolutely was the right thing to do. As I mentioned, that led to the country holding parliamentary and prime ministerial elections, and creating its own leadership.

If we were to look back at that period and ask, “Is there more the international community could have done?”, we would answer, “Yes there are lessons to be learnt, absolutely”, but the country itself, the leaders themselves, pushed back—shrugged off—international support. They wanted to do it themselves and that, I am afraid, led to inertia from the centralised perspective. Decisions were not being made. When there is a vacuum of power, and we have seen this across other parts of the Maghreb—the middle east and north Africa—extremism takes a foothold. We have seen it with Daesh in places such as Derna and Sirte.

Last month’s visit by the Foreign Secretary, however, is an indication that we are moving into a new and cautiously optimistic chapter. The Foreign Secretary was able to meet Prime Minister Siraj in Tripoli itself. His first impressions were that the security the Prime Minister had around him meant that he was being accepted by the majority in both the House of Representatives and the State Council, and that this was allowing his own presidential council and the Government of national accord to take hold and start to re-establish the institutions that I spoke about earlier. It is important to place that into context, but the hon. Gentleman is correct that in the absence of strong central leadership extremism has taken a foothold. That has affected us here in Britain, because those who participated in organising and training the killers in Sousse in Tunisia were themselves trained in Libya. The matter is of concern to us because of that and because of the migration issues, which I shall come on to in a second.

Our Prime Minister very recently spoke with President Obama and other leaders about the concerns of the Libya challenge. There must be an international effort to ensure that we can support Prime Minister Siraj, and indeed Martin Kobler and the UN efforts there. The hon. Gentleman was right to praise the UN envoy. I speak to the envoy regularly, and I am pleased that our ambassador is able to provide support—the hon. Gentleman mentioned the funding we provide to his office. Nor should we overlook the Prime Minister’s envoy, Jonathan Powell, who has worked closely with Martin Kobler and his predecessor. Some £10 million has been allocated for technical support, and if there is a request for further funding we will of course consider it but I understand that such a request has not been forthcoming. The £10 million includes £1.8 million for counter-terrorism work, for exactly the reason I have mentioned, to prevent the vacuum from being taken over by extremism.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I think that that is the same £10 million I asked the Foreign Secretary about—I asked whether it would be counted towards
ODA. He said in the Chamber that he did not think it would, and then he had to write to me to clarify that it would. My question was actually whether it would be counted towards both ODA and the 2% NATO target. I do not know if the Minister has that knowledge to hand, but if he does not perhaps he will be able to clarify by correspondence.

Mr Ellwood: It can be the case that an allocation of funding qualifies for two budgets. There is nothing wrong with that, it is just the way it works. It can come from official development aid—as it is called—but also from the defence budget too. We should not assume that, because it is one allocation, oh my goodness, somehow we are double accounting. That is just the way the systems work.

The reason why we must always confirm whether funding is ODA-able—as it is called—is because the rules were written in the 1950s, as the hon. Gentleman might be aware. They are, therefore, slightly out of date and need updating. The work of stabilisation is not really included in the definitions; it was “humanitarian work” when the rules were created by the OECD. We have been pushing for the rules to be updated, to recognise that the British taxpayer would like to see the money spent on exactly that. But if the rules do not allow for that, that is probably why the Foreign Secretary—indeed, anyone involved—needs to double-check whether the allocation can be confirmed. I hope that that answers the hon. Gentleman’s question.

In addition, we also hosted a meeting of 47 countries last month in Tunisia. That goes back to the point I made earlier: it is important that the international community rallies together and recognises that, in Libya’s hour of need, we need to be ready to provide service and support to the new Prime Minister in a wide range of capacities. We co-hosted the meeting with the United Nations. It allowed all international communities to say what they can contribute, including the funding they can put forward and the packages they can offer to the Prime Minister. I make it clear that we have to be invited by the country to embark on any processes to improve, in the same way as happened back in 2012, when central Government’s wheels perhaps started to come off.

The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine criticised the fact that things went wrong after Gaddafi was removed. I agree that the international community should have pressed for more, but ultimately the Libyan people need to recognise the challenges they face, the support on offer from the international community and the consequences of failing to show the leadership what they want. Extremism gets a footing when there is an absence of leadership. The meeting in April provided exactly that leadership: it brought together the international community and allowed us to provide some scope as to how we would provide support and security.

A lot of discussions will take place about the 1,000 or so troops. The Libyan international assistance mission is an Italian initiative in which Britain, Spain, Italy, France and other nations are likely to participate. There is planning for 1,000 troops or so, but we are yet to receive the invitation—the request—for any support. That support is likely to come, when it does, in the form of training and mentoring. Where that will take place is yet to be decided. It could very well be in Libya or somewhere else in the region, but it is unlikely to take place in Britain. It is training and mentoring; it is not an operational initiative, so there is no requirement for a vote in Parliament. Please do not expect one on the issue. That is the plan as we move forward, but I stress that we are yet to receive any request from the Prime Minister.

As was implied by the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, the challenge we face is with migratory patterns. We are seeing criminal gangs orchestrate ruthlessly efficient programmes, selling tickets and encouraging individuals with the promise that they will get to Europe. Libya is seen as the weak link from which they can get across the Mediterranean. We all know that they do not get across the Mediterranean. The gangs place them in rickety boats that barely make it out of Libyan waters. Operation Sophia, which is the European Union’s initiative, currently operates in international waters. We want to move things forward so that it can operate in Libyan territorial waters, too. That will mean that the boats do not venture so far out that they cannot be returned to Libya. Those people can return back there, thereby breaking the chain from which the criminal gangs are benefiting.

There is no doubt that the challenge of Libya will continue, or that Britain, working with our international partners, will ensure that we stand by the new Prime Minister, the new presidential council and the people of Libya. It has been a very difficult five years; everyone recognises that. It has been extremely challenging, but we must continue to work for peace and security in the country, not only because that is crucial for stability in the wider north African and Mediterranean regions, but because the United Kingdom has important, as I have outlined. After the revolution, the Libyan people expressed joy, enthusiasm and hope after 40 years of Gaddafi’s misrule, oppression and fear. They wanted freedom and democracy, and they held elections. The people of Libya want education and to continue to hear the inspiring stories of Libyans being able to succeed into the future. We want to stand by them, and we will continue to do so in the UK interest, ensuring that Libya emerges as a strong, peaceful and prosperous democracy. I pledge today our continuing support for the Prime Minister and the people of Libya.

Question put and agreed to.
Asylum Seeker Dispersal Policy

11.25 am

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): I beg to move,

That this House has considered asylum seeker dispersal policy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I will begin by touching on the asylum application system as a whole. At present, the system is so inefficient and backlogged that asylum seekers are being housed in hotels and temporary accommodation while endless appeals are dragged out. In the Home Office legacy case statistics, there are people with cases dating back to 2004.

We see the majority of cases turning out to be bogus. In fact, I see many economic migrants who have come to this country illegally clogging up the system with doomed cases, slowing the process for those in genuine need. Statistics from 2012 to 2013 on asylum cases where outcomes have been determined show that only 32% of cases were accepted at the first stage of applying, while 57% were rejected and 11% were withdrawn. Of those cases that were not accepted, 70% were appealed. Of those appeals, 68% were dismissed and 7% were withdrawn. The system is clearly being abused and delayed by bogus claims of asylum, and that cannot continue.

Let me give the House a real-life case study from my constituency surgery on Friday. Hassan is a Sudanese national. He is currently living in Rochdale in a house with four other male asylum seekers. He was 17 when he entered the UK in September 2014 via a lorry from Calais. Before that, he had worked in Libya, earning money in construction. He travelled to Europe by boat. He got off a lorry in Dover. Fingerprints were taken and he was put in a hotel. He spent two months down south. He was then moved up to Rochdale. He has been in Rochdale for one year and five months.

Hassan has been trying to claim asylum. He says there is a conflict between two tribes in close proximity to his village and that a lot of people have been killed. Hassan was interviewed by the Home Office over a year ago in February 2015, but no decision has yet been taken on his case. He now says that he is bored here, has nothing to do and that, if he had the choice, he would return to Sudan. He said:

“I want to feel human, like a normal person.”

He then broke down in tears in my constituency office. That is the reality of the asylum system under this Government.

Whatever we make of this young man’s case, there is no denying that there are failures within the system, and we must remember that the asylum system exists for a very good reason. As a prosperous and tolerant nation, we must play our part in helping those fleeing persecution and horrors in their home country. Earlier this year, a young mother attended my constituency surgery. She had been persecuted because of her Ahmadiyya Muslim faith, and I believed it to be an open-and-shut case. She had been subjected to awful abuse in Pakistan. She was twice violently kidnapped for refusing to abandon her religion. Here was a straightforward case of someone unable to return to their country from fear for their own security. I would always be prepared to support that kind of asylum case. To my complete surprise, her asylum application was rejected. Even though Home Office guidance shows that such cases should be supported, this young woman was denied a safe haven.

I raise that case because it shows the growing strains on our asylum system, which is grinding to a halt. It is being clogged up with economic migrants submitting hopeless cases, while genuine people in need of refuge are told they have no right to sanctuary. The system needs an overhaul. We need a well-resourced and properly funded body that is able to deport quickly those who have no claim and assist those in genuine need of a life away from their home country. We cannot fulfil our moral duty to those in genuine need under the system now in place.

I now come to the issue at the heart of this debate: the unfair dispersal system for asylum seekers. In Rochdale, we have 1,044 asylum seekers at present. That figure represents 3.77% of the 27,650 asylum seekers in England. Rochdale has a population of just over 200,000, so one in every 204 people in Rochdale is an asylum seeker. The situation is worse only in Middlesbrough where there is one asylum seeker to every 152 people. Rochdale has been dumped with an unequal share of the burden. The Minister will say, as he has said previously to me, that this policy was introduced by the previous Labour Government, but that is simply not good enough. He and the rest of his party have been in government for six years now.

The COMPASS contracts introduced under his Government have made the situation worse. In 2012, when the contracts were introduced, Rochdale was responsible for 371 asylum seekers. At the beginning of 2014, this number went up to 550. By the end of 2015, we suddenly had 1,044. The problem does not stop with Rochdale. Ten local authorities in England have just under 40% of all asylum seekers in the country. That is just 10 out of 322 local authorities, according to research that my office has done. The north-west region has been bearing the brunt, taking 50% of all asylum seekers in England.

In correspondence, the Minister stated:

“Our dispersal policy ensures a reasonable spread amongst...local authorities.”

That is clearly not true. Certain regions and councils have done absolutely nothing. The Minister must answer why this problem has got worse under his Government and why he has done nothing about it. I must add that, if local authorities will not sign up voluntarily, why has the Minister not enforced this on the shirkers using sections 100 and 101 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999? The Act enshrines power in the Home Secretary to ensure that leaders of local authorities co-operate to provide support for asylum seekers. The problem has been growing and the Minister must answer why that power has not been used.

Next, I wish to touch on some of the details of the COMPASS contracts. Key performance indicators within the contracts were to factor in the capacity of local health, education and other support services and the risk of increased social tension if the number of asylum seekers increases within a given area. There has been a clear disregard for those factors. A recent report from the Joseph Roundtree Foundation found that 10 of the 12 struggling towns and cities in the UK are in the north of England. Number one in that analysis is...
Rochdale. We can argue with the methodology of the research, but there is no doubt that public services are vital for local people in our town. There is a greater strain on services, yet the Conservative Government have added more than 1,000 asylum seekers to the town. Combined with this, we have Serco dumping asylum seekers in our town with hardly any notice given to the local authority. There are waiting lists for housing in Rochdale and a limited number of school places. Some schools are already being challenged to improve performance, but cannot afford the added burden of even more languages to be learned. Waiting times for GPs and access to accident and emergency are already stretched beyond acceptability.

On the changes to spending power from 2015-16 to 2017-18, Rochdale is again among the hardest hit from Conservative Government cuts, which already affect its ability to fund its already overstretched public services. Between those years, Rochdale will have its spending power reduced from £177 million to £165 million: a reduction of £12 million.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I caution the hon. Gentleman against the use of words such as “dumping” to describe the way in which human beings arrive in his constituency. Does he have a view on extending the right to work to asylum seekers? If asylum seekers are allowed to work and actively contribute to their communities, they would pay tax, including council tax, that would provide resources for local authorities. They would be seen to be actively contributing to communities, and that might help with integration.

Simon Danczuk: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. On the language used, it is not a reflection of the individual asylum seekers, but a reflection of how Serco and the Government treat these vulnerable people. I completely agree about the ability to work. I raised that issue with the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions when I was a parliamentary candidate before the 2010 general election, so I have some sympathy with that view.

On spending power in Rochdale, not only are we predicted to lose £12 million, but on top of that there have been £200 million pound budget cuts to the local authority since 2010. I take no pride in saying that Rochdale is one of the most deprived places in the UK. It pains me to admit that. I, the council and other agencies are doing much more to change that, but we have overstretched public services and a very low wage economy. Asylum seekers, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, are not allowed to work and that causes tension within communities. Groups of asylum seekers wander around town with nothing to do. As I mentioned earlier, the Minister’s Department is no good at processing their applications, so they are hanging around for literally years.

Rochdale is not the only example of such unfairness. The top five local authorities with the most asylum seekers are Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Rochdale and Bolton. All will have their spending power over the next two years reduced by more than 5%, yet they have all taken in more than 1,000 asylum seekers each. So I must ask the Minister why no consideration has been given to the strain put on public services and why tension in the local community has not been factored in.

The irony is that some local authorities see a rise in their spending power and have no asylum seekers at all. It is completely and utterly unfair. I will give some examples. In the Prime Minister’s local authority area of West Oxfordshire, zero asylum seekers are accommodated, despite a healthy 1% increase in spending power over the coming years. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government’s leafy local authority of Tunbridge Wells is also not taking in any asylum seekers and is seeing only a 1% decrease in spending power. The Home Secretary’s area has taken in only three asylum seekers, despite this issue falling under her remit, and faces only a 1% reduction in local authority spending power over the coming years. The Chancellor’s local authority seems to be reluctant to take any asylum seekers at all.

When we look further into the details, we really start to get a picture of the inherent unfairness of the system under this Government. Labour authorities on average have taken in 244 asylum seekers, yet have been on the wrong side of an average 5% reduction in spending power between 2015-16 and 2017-18. In contrast, Conservative local authorities have taken in only six asylum seekers on average and have suffered a rather modest 1% reduction in spending power. What is evident here is that Labour-run authorities are clearly the more compassionate. When they see vulnerable people, they strive to help wherever they can. That is an attribute that should be celebrated by the Government. Yet those councils have been hit with the largest reductions in spending power. Rather than helping those local authorities, the Government seem hellbent on ensuring that they make things as hard as possible, letting them take in some of the most vulnerable people, while tying one hand behind their back. This is partisan politics at its worst. The Minister must take action to stop it.

The Minister can choose to put whatever spin he wants on the situation, but it is clear that the status quo is deeply unfair to the less well-off. Areas that are struggling the most under this Conservative Government have been made to carry the increasing burden of our overweight and slowing asylum system; they have been doing so while the local areas of the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government have done nothing but shirk their responsibilities to the most vulnerable people in society, while shielding themselves from the worst cuts.

Labour-run local authorities have been doing more than their fair share, but Conservative authorities have been ignoring the plight of asylum seekers. The most unjust aspect of the whole situation is that it is Labour local authorities that are being punished the most with cuts, while Conservative authorities are being rewarded for sitting back and watching. I look forward to the Minister’s attempt to address each and every point raised in the debate.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Patrick Grady, I should say to the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), who will be speaking from the Front
Bench for Scottish National party, that we started early because both the mover of the motion and the Minister were present. The hon. Gentleman missed only the aperitif; he is here for the meat of the debate.

11.41 am

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I am grateful to have been called, Mr Hanson, having not indicated beforehand that I wanted to speak. Having seen how sparse the attendance was, I thought I should take the opportunity to reflect briefly on some of the points made by the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk).

Glasgow, part of which I represent, has approximately one asylum seeker per 217 residents, placing it in the top 10 centres of asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. The asylum seeker community has done nothing but benefit the society and culture of my city. We must recognise the huge contribution that people make to Scotland and the United Kingdom when they come here from all over the world for a wide range of reasons. It reflects well on the city of Glasgow when it extends the kind of welcome it has done to people coming from extremely vulnerable and distressing situations.

I pay tribute to the work of the integration networks in Glasgow. Community-based organisations play an incredibly valuable role in providing advice and support to asylum seekers. Since being elected last year, some of the most moving experiences I have had have been when I have encountered asylum seekers, either in formal settings facilitated by the likes of the Maryhill integration network in my constituency, or on a one-to-one basis when they have come to my constituency surgeries.

The hon. Member for Rochdale made the point that Cabinet Ministers lack first-hand experience of these issues because they simply do not have comparable numbers of constituents coming to their surgeries, and that does affect overall Government policy and attitude towards asylum seekers. There is nothing more humiliating for me as a Member of Parliament than sitting in a surgery and a constituent presenting me with a card that tells them, “You do not have the right to work.” That right is enshrined in human rights instruments around the world. It is one of the basic factors that allows people to express their human dignity by using their skills, attributes and strengths to earn a living for themselves. For them to be issued with a card from the Government that says, “You do not have the right to work,” is literally inhumane.

Likewise, when I see bits of paper that say, “You are liable to be lifted and deported and expelled from the country,” I am left literally speechless in front of these people, who have fled some of the most terrifying and difficult situations around the world. We heard about some of those situations in the previous debate about Libya—conflict situations in which, very often, the UK is complicit. There has to be an absolutely integrated and joined-up approach from the Government. Currently, such an approach is completely and utterly lacking.

Asylum seekers need to have the right to work. The Azure card, which allows people to buy things only from certain shops, should be abolished. Cash allowances would enable people to get culturally appropriate clothing, food or utensils, or whatever else they might need to provide for themselves or their families. Much asylum support is provided through the Home Office, rather than by the Department for Work and Pensions. From a practical point of view, could that be integrated between the Home Office and the DWP? That might help to address some of the challenges and issues we hear of.

On dispersal, it is appropriate that local authorities throughout the country find a way to take their fair share, but they have to know that they are going to get Government support. The right to work is particularly important because it would make it all the more attractive to local authorities if they thought that their revenue base, council tax base or whatever might grow. We create work and problems for ourselves when we bracket people and let them get trapped in a bureaucratic system that denies them basic human rights.

I am grateful to have been called, Mr Hanson, because I wanted to take the opportunity to offer some reflections on the issues. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

11.46 am

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) on securing this debate and providing Members with the opportunity to scrutinise Government policy on the dispersal of asylum seekers at this important time in the development of that strand of policy. I am sorry to have missed the aperitif, but I certainly got the main substance of what the hon. Gentleman had to say.

Broadly, dispersal issues can be put into two categories. First, what exactly do we need to do and provide for those who have claimed asylum here? Secondly, where should that happen? To start with the second issue—the “where”, which is the meat of the debate—no one would now quibble with the Government’s stated ambition to expand the number of areas to which asylum seekers are being dispersed, although I certainly have sympathy with the hon. Gentleman’s argument that that should have happened long before now. More widespread dispersal is entirely the correct thing to do, from a number of different angles: it is fair that responsibility for providing housing and other support is shared around the country, and it is easier for local communities to adjust and for asylum seekers to integrate into those communities when responsibility is shared out in that way.

As we have heard, a number of authorities are shouldering a disproportionate share of the responsibility, including Middlesbrough—where the cluster limit of one asylum seeker for every 200 of the settled population has been exceeded—and Rochdale. As I understand it, the Home Office has written to other local authorities to encourage them to take part in the dispersal process; it would be useful to have information from the Minister on the response to that request. Many authorities are absolutely willing to play their part, but that willingness is conditional: they will play their part if, and only if, full and proper support comes from central Government. That is absolutely the correct approach.

That brings us to the other key issue: what exactly do we want to achieve through the dispersal process? It should not be about paying private companies to seek out the cheapest accommodation they can find in different corners of the country and then simply placing asylum seekers there willy-nilly, while leaving hard-pressed local authorities and other services to get on with it. That is
not a sensible way ahead, but as the hon. Member for Rochdale said, sadly it sometimes appears to be all the COMPASS contract was designed to achieve and has achieved. Like the hon. Gentleman, I have made my misgivings about the contracts known in other debates: I will wait for the Home Affairs Committee to look at that issue more forensically in due course.

Dispersal should occur as sensibly and sensitively as possible, ensuring the provision of required support and finding communities where people fit. That means accommodating people and taking account of family circumstances, age, language and other factors. Most importantly, dispersal must occur where asylum seekers will have access to necessary support and services. Previously, COMPASS health assessments—for those dispersed to Glasgow, for example—were very easy to arrange: they took place in the same building in which many asylum seekers were initially accommodated. Sadly, under the current contract, providers are proving significantly less reliable at making support available to ensure that people can get where they need to go, and appointments are being missed. That is an extremely worrying development, particularly as those people often have complex health needs. Some are victims of torture, and many have mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder; as a result of the traumas that they have been through.

There is a range of other factors to be considered. When I practised as an immigration solicitor, there was—there still is—an experienced and capable group of immigration and asylum law practitioners in Glasgow, because it is a dispersal city and there is significant demand. However, that is not the case in other cities in Scotland and elsewhere, where dispersal has not yet taken place. We need to ensure that those who are dispersed to new towns and cities have access to quality advice, which is essential for their often complicated cases.

Local authorities in different parts of the UK have sought to go above and beyond what is required. The Scottish Government have funded the Scottish Refugee Council’s family keyword service to support newly arrived families with children aged up to eight during their first six months. It covers areas such as advice about the asylum system, education and health, and it co-ordinates the different services.

As the hon. Member for Rochdale said, it is vital to keep communities involved and on side. There can be no sudden appearance of large numbers of asylum seekers without warning, which has happened from time to time with initial dispersal accommodation. That does not work for anyone. Equally, leaving asylum seekers alone and isolated by placing them in ones or twos in different parts of cities is also not helpful.

I have touched on only a tiny number of the basic wrap-around services that need to be considered when dispersing asylum seekers. We could have a whole debate on the right to work; the Scottish National party voted last week in support of the right to work, and we will always do so. Local authorities think twice about getting involved because it requires proper planning, close partnership working and discussions among national, devolved and local governments. That requires not just planning but proper resourcing, and many local authorities feel that the current arrangements provide neither sufficiently. The model of using private contractors to provide accommodation without additional support services is not attractive to them.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) said, Glasgow has benefited over the years from the dispersal of asylum seekers in a number of ways, but when that policy was first introduced the council was contracted directly by the Home Office to provide accommodation and the funding was sufficient to develop a whole host of wrap-around services as well. The existing COMPASS contracts move away from that model. Glasgow can just about cope, because it already has well-developed infrastructure to support asylum seekers, but local authorities with no history of dispersal do not. If the Home Office attempts to expand the programme without adequate funding for developing services, we would be seriously concerned about the impact on public services and community cohesion. It is the same issue with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children: I understand that the Home Office is not paying a daily rate that covers the cost of supporting vulnerable young people.

Local authorities have willingly participated in the resettlement of refugees under the vulnerable persons scheme, and although there will always be differences in schemes’ requirements, the stark contrast in resourcing and planning cannot be justified. Why not learn lessons from the successes of the vulnerable persons scheme? Local authorities will ask why they should agree to take part in the dispersal programme and then have to shoulder the responsibility for funding services such as education.

We support the Government’s ambition to broaden dispersal, but their vision of what dispersal is all about requires much more work to convince us and, more importantly, local authorities. The Government should get down to that work quickly before contemplating using the powers in the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 or the new powers in the Immigration Bill, which is currently going through Parliament.

Keir Starmer

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) on securing this debate.

The asylum seekers dispersal policy and the contracts for providing accommodation have something of a sorry history. As we know, the six contracts were signed in March 2012 and taken up by G4S, Serco and Clearal. Only Clearal had any experience of the asylum housing sector, and that soon began to tell. The most significant findings of the National Audit Office’s January 2014 report were that G4S and Serco took on stock without inspecting it, that the Home Office did not apply the key performance indicators in the transition period and that, although the intention and hope was for savings of £140 million, the savings in the year 2012-13 amounted to just £8 million.

Those are not teething problems, but clearly ongoing problems with the current system. The Home Affairs Committee, the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office all highlighted serious flaws in the operation of the current dispersal system. The use
of red doors and wristbands in Middlesbrough and Cardiff, which arose earlier this year, led to disquiet among the public and in the media.

There are five big issues. The first is the standard of the accommodation being used, about which the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office expressed concern. The Public Accounts Committee concluded that

“The standard of the accommodation provided was often unacceptably poor”.

I visited Oldham earlier this year—I will mention this a number of times in my speech—and I was struck by the quality of the accommodation provided on the ground in some of the towns in the north-west, where lots of asylum seekers are housed.

Secondly, there is a concern about the oversight and inspection regime. The Home Affairs Committee concluded that

“the complaints and inspection processes...appears to be flawed”.

Asylum seekers have little opportunity to make complaints, and the inspections by the local authorities and the Home Office are ineffective. The issues of the red doors and the wristbands exemplify the flaws in the system. In the end, those issues were exposed by the media, not the complaints and inspection regime, which is intended to deal with such issues.

Thirdly, there is the issue of clustering, which has been touched upon already. There are clearly marked differences in where asylum seekers are housed. Some local authorities take very large numbers—Glasgow has the highest, with some 3,000 or so—but 177 local authorities have refused to take any and a further 100 have taken five or fewer. There are clearly limits, which the Minister will point to, to the policy of not housing in London and the south-east and to the voluntary opt-in for local authorities—in other words, it cannot be mandated—but there are some marked differences. Let me take three examples at random. Swansea has rehoused 843 asylum seekers, whereas neighbouring Carmarthenshire has rehoused none and neighbouring Neath Port Talbot has rehoused only one. Middlesbrough has taken 917, whereas Redcar and Cleveland has taken just 10 and Hamilton has taken none. Glasgow, as I mentioned, has got 3,000, East Renfrewshire has got none and Renfrewshire has got just four. There are clearly big differences across the country.

Fourthly, there is a lack of appropriate support services. In other words, the dispersal of asylum seekers is not matched by appropriate support—whether healthcare, schooling or language classes—leaving asylum seekers isolated and vulnerable.

Fifthly, rising demand is outstripping housing and service supply. We all know that the number of asylum seekers has increased from about 18,000 in 2010 to 32,400 in 2015. All three providers of dispersal accommodation have emphasised that it is proving very difficult to get more accommodation for housing at a viable rate. The 2014 NAO report recommended that the Home Office share forecasts and flow with the contractors. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether that is happening and, if so, how it is being managed.

The policy questions and issues that arise are these. We need to underline that the dispersal system should be fair, affordable and humane, and that it should protect and promote community cohesion. There is no doubt that, under the current scheme, none of those things are being achieved. I have real concerns about clustering. In Oldham—no doubt, the situation is the same in Rochdale and some of the other areas that have been touched on—I witnessed large numbers of asylum seekers being housed not only in one local authority, but in a particular area within the local authority, predominantly because housing is simply cheaper there than anywhere else. The high concentrations in the areas I visited in Oldham were causing real concern for the asylum seekers, who felt isolated because of how they were being housed, and for the people of Oldham, who felt that they were taking on too much, in one small area and more than they could cope with. So there are real problems for community cohesion in the way that the dispersal system works.

The system cannot be based purely on the bottom line. In other words, the cost of accommodation cannot be the driver—there has got to be a wider approach. Cheaper provision is not synonymous with better provision. A resonating question that has already been asked is, what are the Government doing to encourage more local authorities to take part in dispersal? To be clear, I am not suggesting that the Home Office should be mandating local authorities to take asylum seekers at this stage. I can see real problems with that if that is the fall-back position. Letters have been written, but what more can be done? In addition, what support is being offered to local authorities to make it more likely that more of them will offer to provide accommodation and other services?

What are the Government doing to improve oversight and inspection of dispersal accommodation? I have already mentioned the revelations in Middlesbrough and Cardiff; they throw up a failure of the complaints and inspection system, which needs to be looked at again.

I, too, would like an update on the savings. According to the NAO, the savings in 2012-13 were £8 million of the expected £140 million. We are now nearly four years into the contracts, and it is important for the Minister to give an update on what the savings have been, because they were the driver of the contracts.

It is time to review the overall costs, not only the cost of providing the accommodation now, compared with before the contracts, but the cost that takes the prohibition on work into account. That has been touched on. The only reason why many of the families and individuals who are seeking asylum need to be housed under such arrangements at all is that they are prohibited from working. They fall into the destitute category because they arrive with little in the way of cash or other assets and are prohibited from working. It is therefore inevitable that large numbers within that group must then be accommodated.

Measures have been taken to improve the period within which decisions are made, but many decisions are still not made or concluded within the six months—many more beyond the 12 months—so, for a prolonged period, asylum seekers are prohibited from working and are inevitably dependent upon housing at public expense, which they could otherwise pay for if they were working. All the evidence suggests that at the end of the process, if people are granted refugee status, there is a strong likelihood that they will stay within the local
authority where they have been temporarily housed—perhaps inevitably. Furthermore, because they have not been able to work for the period it took for the decision to be made, the likelihood is that the local authority will still have to house them, because they will not be able to go straight into work at the end of it.

I have a probing question for the Minister. Is it time to step back and ask what the overall cost of the dispersal policy is factoring in the prohibition on work? Would it be better in most, if not all, cases to allow people to work after a given period, so that they can pay for their own accommodation? They would not need to be in a particular local authority to do so.

That supports my wider call: it is now time to review the dispersal policy. There are clearly ongoing problems that have not been resolved. I think that the contracts expire in 2017, with a possible two-year extension, so there is a window of opportunity to review the situation before the contracts are renewed for either two years, or even longer in 2017.

12.4 pm

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I believe for the first time. I welcome you to the Chair and to your role.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) on securing the debate, and on his probing questions and focus on the subject. He spoke about the impact on his community, given the pressure from the number of asylum seekers, and he has flagged some of the issues. Let me say at the outset that I hope that we will continue the discussion outside the Chamber; perhaps in meetings between Serco, my officials, him and his council about the pressures and the matters he has brought to the House’s attention this morning.

On the overall background, the UK has a long and proud history of offering sanctuary to those genuinely fleeing persecution. I confirm that the Government remain committed to providing an asylum system that protects and respects the fundamental rights of individuals who arrive on our shores seeking refuge from persecution. The Government also want to send a clear message to those who seek to exploit the system—a point that was clearly made by the hon. Gentleman.

For those asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute, the Government provide access to support services, in accordance with our international obligations. The Government provide that support through the COMPASS contracts, which have been mentioned, with three contractors: Serco, G4S and Clearsprings Ready Homes. The contracts provide asylum seekers who claim to be destitute with full-board so-called initial accommodation while their means are assessed, and then with the dispersed accommodation throughout the UK.

The Home Office is working hard with its contractors to ensure that all the accommodation provided to asylum seekers is safe and secure, and that asylum seekers are treated with dignity and respect, taking account of their vulnerability. We are also ensuring that the system is effective and efficient, and provides value for money for the taxpayer. Since the new approach came into operation in 2012, standards in asylum seeker accommodation have improved.

The specific point that the hon. Gentleman focused on was the policy that follows the period of initial accommodation: the dispersal of supported asylum seekers across a number of areas in the United Kingdom. The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 introduced the policy of national dispersal, which was designed to share the impact of asylum seekers across the whole of the UK. At the time, in how it was constructed, the policy was intended to ease the burden of numbers on London and the south-east.

Not all asylum seekers are supported by the Home Office. Many are accommodated by their friends or relatives throughout the UK, often in London and the south-east of England, which also has pressure on local services from unaccompanied asylum-seeking children—I might comment briefly on that matter later. The legislation was introduced to relieve the pressures on the local authorities that had previously shouldered a significant proportion of the asylum seekers, given their proximity to the main ports of entry into the UK. The dispersal policy aims to ensure a spread among UK local authorities, and we work to a maximum agreed dispersal cluster ratio of one asylum seeker per 200 head of total population. We would not normally go beyond that ratio without the agreement of the relevant local authority.

Historically, approximately 100 local authorities were signed up to asylum dispersal. We have been proactively engaging with all areas that to date have not participated in asylum dispersal, with a view to negotiating voluntary agreements for them to do so. The number of participants now stands at 103, with approximately 20 more signed up. We are engaging with areas that to date have not participated. Since 2015, 21 new local authority areas have agreed to become dispersal areas, with another 28 areas in discussion with us and our housing providers.

Through regional strategic migration partnerships—which basically group together the local authorities within a particular region and are Home Office-funded forums—we work with the contractors, local government and other local agencies to plan the most appropriate dispersal of asylum seekers. The partnerships consider the impact on communities and local services so that adjustments can be made where appropriate. This is intended to ensure that community cohesion, social welfare and safety issues are properly considered. We judge strategic migration partnerships to be the best mechanism to achieve that focus. We are working in particular with the strategic migration partnership in the north-west, where there have been particular pressures, so that local authorities in the surrounding areas can play their part in assisting the partnership.

Asylum seekers are placed in initial accommodation while their claims for support are addressed. Initial accommodation is short term and, after successfully claiming for support, asylum seekers are housed in dispersed accommodation. In initial accommodation, which tends to be hostel or halls of residence-style accommodation, service users are put in touch with support services and healthcare and provided with meals. Across the UK, there are initial accommodation centres in Croydon, Liverpool, London, Glasgow, Cardiff, Wakefield and Birmingham.
As has been indicated in a number of the contributions to the debate, and as I am sure hon. Members will recognise, global events have meant that the number of asylum seekers—many of them destitute and in need of our support—entering the UK has increased this year. That, and a change in the mix of the nationalities and characteristics of asylum seekers, means increased demand on the asylum accommodation system. As the hon. Member for Rochdale correctly said, the number of asylum seekers accommodated in Rochdale has increased in recent years. I pay tribute to the town for its participation in the asylum seeker dispersal scheme and the support it has provided to asylum seekers for many years.

We work closely with local authorities that raise concerns about dispersal to help to address those concerns. Indeed, my officials and I have met individual MPs to listen and respond to local concerns, and I extend an invitation to the hon. Member for Rochdale to meet us to pursue a number of the points that he has flagged. For example, we have listened to the concerns of the local authority and stakeholders in Prestwick and ceased the use of contingency accommodation there. In Middlesbrough, we have agreed with the Mayor to reduce the number of asylum seekers to the 1:200 dispersal ratio by the end of December, and the population there is already reducing. In Manchester, Birmingham and Cardiff, we have listened to the concerns of local authorities and MPs and our providers are reducing, in a gradual and balanced way, their use of hotels as temporary accommodation.

I remain convinced that increasing participation in the asylum seeker dispersal scheme is the strongest long-term solution for avoiding the use of contingency accommodation such as hotels. The director general of UK Visas and Immigration has written to local authority chief executives to ask them to participate in dispersal, and I plan to write again to local authority leaders following the local council elections.

Simon Danczuk: Am I right to say that the Department has the power to instruct local authorities as opposed to asking them to co-operate voluntarily, or does it not have that power to mandate?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman made a point in his contribution about the powers in the 1999 Act, which have not been used to date. Our preference is to continue to work with individual local authorities through the strategic migration partnerships to get buy-in from those authorities on broader dispersal. We would face challenges if we were to try to create, effectively, a mandated national dispersal mechanism, which is what the hon. Member has highlighted. However, I am clear about the need for an efficient and effective service. We have been driving that through change over recent years and we intend to retain a focus on that.

On the COMPASS contracts, the suppliers are contractually required to provide safe, habitable, fit-for-purpose accommodation to comply with the Housing Act 2004 and the decent homes standards. All Home Office contracts include performance standards that are defined in the contract and managed using key performance indicators. Any failure in delivering the critical service levels may result in deductions against submitted invoices in the form of service credits. The Home Office and the providers regularly inspect asylum seeker accommodation. All three contractors are currently meeting the key performance indicators for property standards. When any defects are found through the inspection regime, such defects are being rectified promptly and within contractual time limits.

I stress the change we have made in the inspection regime. We are listening more closely to service users—I think we had not previously listened and had that rightful feedback from them to a sufficient degree—and working with non-governmental organisations to pick up on issues where they arise, so that we are better able to target the inspection regime and address any concerns about the quality of accommodation that asylum seekers use. The Home Office regularly inspects properties in Rochdale and did so only last week. The inspection found that the accommodation was of a good standard and that the asylum seekers living there felt adequately supported.

To take the point raised by the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the COMPASS contracts, as well as improving accommodation standards, remain on target to deliver £136.4 million of financial benefits during their lifetime.
compared with the cost of the previous arrangements. As I made clear at the recent, passionate Westminster Hall debate on 19 April on unaccompanied children, the Home Office takes its “responsibility for the welfare of children seriously.”—[Official Report, 19 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 286WH.]

We have stringent and statutory policy safeguards in place regarding child welfare. Ensuring that we treat children with care and compassion is a priority.

Last year saw a 56% increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arriving in the UK, particularly in Kent. The Government are grateful to all those in Kent and to other local authorities meeting that challenge for the excellent way in which they have responded to those pressures and we are keen that there should be no repetition of the situation that occurred in Kent last summer. That is why I have announced that we will put in place a national transfer scheme this summer to ensure a fairer distribution of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children across the UK.

I am extremely grateful for the collaborative way in which the Local Government Association and the Association of Directors of Children’s Services have engaged with that work. I will be writing to all local authorities again after the local elections to provide further information about the scheme and the support mechanisms.

I am sure hon. Members will agree that the outpouring of support we have seen in response to the Syrian crisis has been incredible, from local authorities that have volunteered to take refugees as part of the Syrian resettlement programme, to offers of help from the general public, businesses and voluntary organisations. Less visible is the ongoing support in communities such as Rochdale and what they have been doing to provide for asylum seekers over a number of years. I pay tribute to those communities.

Keir Starmer: I have said before that I think the scheme to resettle Syrian families is very good, but I have a growing concern about a two-tier system. I know that there is much greater financial support for local authorities that house Syrian families than for those that house other asylum-seeking individuals. Does the Minister share my concern that there is a growing perception of a two-tier asylum-seeking system evolving?

James Brokenshire: It is important to remember that those who are arriving into the UK through the Syrian resettlement scheme are given refugee status on arrival. There is a distinction to be drawn between those granted refugee status and those seeking a refugee status that has not yet been established.

On the hon. and learned Gentleman’s point, we need to ensure that we retain focus across the system, in respect of the asylum system and also resettlement programmes. We continue to do that. I work very closely with the Minister for Syrian refugees to ensure that we recognise the pressures that may build up in certain local authority areas from supporting asylum seekers, as well as pressures for those that are meeting responsibilities under the refugee scheme, including in relation to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. There are a number of different pathways and factors that need to be viewed in their totality. That is precisely what the Government are doing and will continue to do. I pay tribute to those communities that are taking action, supporting asylum seekers in their communities and playing their part. I am keen that we build on that support and join up between resettlement and asylum wherever possible, so that all communities across the UK are able to support unaccompanied children, asylum seekers and refugees.

I agree with a number of hon. Members that we need to continue to widen the dispersal system across the UK. That is what we are seeking to do, and we have had some important successes. That is the best way for the towns and cities of the UK to offer protection to those who genuinely need it. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Rochdale for raising this debate, and I look forward to continuing the conversation.

Simon Danczuk: I will be brief. I thank you for chairing the debate, Mr Hanson, and I thank the Minister for his contribution and some of the answers he has given. I have concerns about the dispersal system, which is why I called for this debate. I appreciate that the Government are beginning to move towards a wider dispersal strategy, but some speed would be appreciated.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved, That this House has considered asylum seeker dispersal policy.
Burial or Cremation (Delays)

[GRAHAM STRINGER in the Chair]

1 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered delays between death and burial or cremation.

The purpose of this debate is to consider the increasing amount of time that is now occurring between a person dying and their subsequent burial or cremation. The subject was considered by the all-party parliamentary group on funerals and bereavement, which was founded in 2002 to examine issues of concern to parliamentarians and their constituents. Of course, the group brings together Members of both Houses, representatives of the funeral director profession and representatives of bereaved people. The report on delays originated in the previous Parliament at the instigation of Paul Goggins MP. We all remember him well as the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East from 1997 until his untimely death in January 2014. At various meetings of the all-party group, he raised issues related to delays and their impact on people who had lost loved ones.

The report was commenced under the chairmanship of my predecessor as chair of the all-party group, Lorely Burt MP, now Baroness Burt. We held evidence sessions in July 2014 and January 2015, and we published our report in December 2015. We have had three ministerial responses since the publication of our report. The Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer), addressed death certification issues, including the role of the medical examiner within the National Health Service. The Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my noble Friend Baroness Williams of Trafford, addressed crematoriums and burial facilities. We received an extensive reply from the Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), and I am delighted that she is here today. She addressed legal issues and the provision of services that are legally required.

The objective of today’s debate is to highlight some of the issues raised in the report and, in addition, to provide an opportunity for the Minister to update the House on the measures she mentioned in her letter of three months ago. I note that she will respond purely on those matters for which the Ministry of Justice has responsibility. The all-party group will continue the dialogue it has already started with Ministers in other Departments.

At the outset, it is useful to consider why the report was necessary. It is accepted that the time taken between death and a funeral or cremation is getting longer. We received written evidence suggesting that the average time between death and burial or cremation is some 15 days, which was pretty standard in the submissions we received. Witnesses, however, noted that the time could vary significantly based on factors in the local area, whether the death was expected and whether the death occurred at home or in hospital. There was consensus among our witnesses that the time had increased in recent years. One witness suggested that the time had increased from some 10 days in 2003 to 15 days in 2013, which is an increase of five days, or half again as much, over a period of 10 years. Another witness noted that, between 2012 and 2014, an average of two days had been added to the process.

There is a problem in measuring the change in time, because central statistics are not collected. Although some funeral directors collect those data, the figures cannot easily be broken down to show which aspect of the process is causing delays. The national medical examiner told the all-party group that the new death certification system is likely to add half a day or so to the current average time. He was at pains to express it as an average so, in some instances, we can expect the process to take longer.

In 2015, the National Association of Funeral Directors surveyed its members and it identified that families were waiting increasingly long to see a registrar after a death. Almost 70% of members reported that waiting times had increased over the previous year, with 49% of families waiting at least three days for an appointment and 15% waiting more than five days. A survey of National Association of Funeral Directors members this month revealed a complex picture of the effectiveness of coronial services across England and Wales, with, regrettably, only 41% describing their local coronial service as good or very good. Thirty per cent. described their local coroner as providing a satisfactory service, and 27% described the service as unsatisfactory or very unsatisfactory. That is one area of concern.

The all-party group took evidence from a range of witnesses involved in the process, including bereavement support groups, funeral directors, faith groups and organisations representing coroners’ staff, pathologists, crematorium staff and cemetery management. There is consensus among those working in the sector on the increasing time between death and burial or cremation, and we heard a number of reasons for why that might be, including increased pressure on registration and death certification services, a lack of communication and co-ordination between the organisations involved in certifying a death, and a lack of core crematorium slots.

Our report contained 13 conclusions and recommendations, and I will pick out three key ones. First, we urged the Government to review their post-mortem arrangements. The implementation of death certification reforms provides an opportune moment to assess whether the current fee of £96.80 for a post-mortem examination is sustainable. The all-party group would welcome an assessment from the Government on whether sufficient pathologists are being trained in autopsies to cater for future demand, as the requirement to study a post-mortem module has been removed from the appropriate syllabus.

Secondly, the Government should undertake a comprehensive review of the current state of burial and cremation in the UK, including an assessment of the projected capacity needs for the next 50 years and a review of barriers to developing crematoriums and cemeteries. New crematoriums are being developed. I am proud that a new crematorium has opened in my constituency of Rugby in the past few years, and it is an excellent example of the local authority working jointly with the neighbouring authority, Daventry District Council. We have a facility in my constituency of which we can be proud, so it is possible for additional facilities to be provided.
Thirdly, we urged the Government to publish their proposals on death certification reform and to ensure that they address two key issues: reducing the number of people involved in the certification process; and enabling the provision of certification outside regular working hours. On the latter matter, since our report was published, we have held a feedback session with the various witnesses who came along to give evidence in order to review the responses we received from Ministers. Concerns were raised in that session about the comments of the national medical examiner, Professor Peter Furness, who said that, on average, the new death certification process “is taking approximately half a day longer than the old one”.

There is a feeling that half a day is something of an underestimate. The all-party group is pleased that a number of consultations have been announced since the report’s publication. We are keen to see them resolved, particularly the consultation on death certification reform by the Department of Health and the consultation on crematorium provision and facilities by the Department for Communities and Local Government. We are also pleased that the Ministry of Justice has been consulting on an out of hours coroner service, and we are keen to see the outcome of that consultation; I hope that the Minister can provide us with an update.

As I said, we held a feedback session, which produced two conclusions. One conclusion that might be of concern to the Minister was the feeling among those in the sector that none of the ministerial responses inspired confidence that the Government understand that bereaved people, those who have lost a loved one, are at the centre of the system. The belief was that things are process-driven, that it is a matter of numbers and that there is a lack of understanding that people are affected. The feedback session’s second conclusion was that the Government must focus on ensuring that all Departments involved in the death process work together more coherently, and that that culture change must be instilled in every organisation involved, whether in central Government or local government.

We picked out one or two additional observations. In respect of the out of hours issue, we know that the NHS is moving more towards a seven-day service, and it is believed that death facilities should do the same, so that out of hours service is available for those who need it. Many attendees at our feedback meeting highlighted the lack of consistency among coroners’ offices in terms of contact practices and the ability to offer non-invasive autopsy options. In particular, some witnesses highlighted that some coroner offices would not speak to funeral directors but wanted email communication instead. They advised us that emails sometimes go unanswered.

A number of witnesses highlighted that they increasingly struggle to get access to some mortuaries when several are run by the same NHS trust. It is believed that, to save costs, some trusts reduce the opening hours for each mortuary, meaning that bodies can be unavailable for days at a time. Our attendees noted that, although 80% of deaths occur in hospitals, as far as they are aware, medical professionals are not given training in the death certification process and what best practice looks like. Our previous chair, Baroness Burt, disagreed with DWP Ministers’ assessment that the funeral payments system is fit for purpose.

I have a number of questions to which I hope the Minister can respond in the time available, particularly about improvements to the coroner out of hours service, to which I have referred and which we are interested to hear about. I understand that she has met with the Metropolitan Police Service to consider an across-London out of hours coroner service. If she cannot respond to my specific question now, perhaps she could respond in writing to the all-party group on that and on other questions in due course. Has her Department assessed how the coroner service and other organisations involved in the process will work alongside a seven-day NHS?

This issue came out of several of our meetings: would it be possible for a simple flowchart to be made available so that people could see clearly the process after death? It would give both bereaved people and policy makers a better understanding of what is going on to have some explanation of the path towards a funeral. A graphic representation may help policy makers to identify which processes are causing delay.

Our inquiry was interesting, and we came up with a number of recommendations and developments. It is clear that the delays are causing great distress to many people, not least many in our faith communities, who for faith reasons are anxious for burial or cremation to take place more promptly after death. I hope that, when the Minister rises to bring us up to date, she will be able to reassure the many people to whom we spoke that the Government take these issues seriously and that the delays that have increased in recent years might be reduced in order to minimise the distress caused to bereaved people.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con) rose—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Before I call the hon. Member for Hendon, does he have permission to speak from both the proposer of the debate and the Minister?

Dr Offord: I have sought permission from the proposer, but not from the Minister. Is she prepared to allow me to speak?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage) indicated assent.

1.15 pm

Dr Offord: I am grateful to you for allowing me to speak, Mr Stringer. I am prompted by events this weekend. Both the Jewish and Muslim traditions require that burial take place as soon as possible after death, preferably within 24 hours, but the process is sometimes affected adversely by the unavailability of any coroner out of hours, the absence of an appropriate doctor or the lack of available facilities in local authorities for rapid registration. It has been a problem and a cause of concern in my constituency; I raised the issue on the Floor of the House only this January, asking what provisions the Government are making to ensure that such services are available.
In the last week, a constituent of mine has been involved in a very difficult process. Liora Rosenberg was on a life support machine in Hampstead at the Royal London hospital. Unfortunately, on Saturday night she died. To compound her untimely death at the age of 20, her parents were unable to obtain a death certificate over the weekend, meaning that burial is being delayed; the coroner for the Royal London hospital will not consider engaging with the issues surrounding Liora’s passing out of hours. It is adding to the grief of her family, who cannot commence the formal shiva—the Jewish period of mourning—until after the funeral, which can be conducted only after the coroner concludes her investigations.

I am aware that no one wants to interfere with the legal process, but we must be mindful of the problems faced by particular faith communities. As I said, I have raised specific cases in north London. Will the Minister continue with the coroner reform programme to ensure that an out of hours coroner service is available?

Within the Jewish tradition, there is a process called performing a mitzvah, a good deed on someone’s behalf. Lauren Rosenberg, Liora’s mother, has asked everyone to perform a mitzvah today. Will the Minister perform her mitzvah by ensuring that, in future, people have access to the coroner service and death certificates so that the dead can be buried appropriately and as soon as possible?

I.18 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage):**
It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) on securing this important debate. As he said, he wrote to me on 16 December last year to bring my attention to the report by the all-party parliamentary group on funerals and bereavement, which set out 13 recommendations and conclusions that the all-party group wished the Government to consider and take forward. I start by commending the all-party group’s work in producing such a comprehensive report. I pay tribute to the late Paul Goggins, the former Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East, who was instrumental in instigating much of the work.

I am grateful for the opportunity to update hon. Members on the progress made since the report was published. I should probably start by saying that Members will be aware that responsibility for the period between death and burial or cremation lies across several different agencies—the Department of Health, local authorities, the police, coroners—all of which have different levels of autonomy. I think that I can safely say that if we were going to start from scratch and create a system anew, we probably would not organise it in quite that way. I certainly take on board my hon. Friend’s suggestion of a flowchart—I wish I had had one when I first took on this ministerial role—but I am keenly aware that, as he pointed out, at the heart of this process and all these authorities are people who are grieving and need to be supported through a particularly difficult time in their lives.

I will run through a few of the issues that have been raised today. My hon. Friends the Members for Rugby and for Hendon (Dr Offord) raised the issue of out of hours coroner services. As they and the all-party group are aware, the Ministry of Justice has been considering how an out of hours coroner service can be achieved. Of course, this is of concern to faith communities, particularly the Jewish and Muslim communities, because without it—as my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon has already highlighted—there can be a considerable delay, preventing the timely burial of loved ones that is required by certain faiths.

My right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice and I share that concern. Together, we have met members of the Jewish and Muslim communities, and separately I have met members of the Jewish community, and I have been working consistently with the London authorities, the Chief Coroner and the Metropolitan police to try to develop an out of hours service across London.

Some progress has been made. In particular, I sense that the Metropolitan police now appreciate the urgency of recruiting a full complement of coroner’s officers to work “in hours” in each of the seven coroner areas that it covers. However, more needs to be done to cover the out of hours service, and we are doing all that we can to bring the various constituent parties together to achieve that. It is absolutely fundamental that we allow bereaved people of whatever faith to make their funeral arrangements quickly, preventing the distress that can be caused by delay.

The all-party group drew attention to the sustainability of pathology services. I can report that the Health Education England commissioning and investment plan for 2016–17 shows a steady state of commissioning in the five pathology specialties. Health Education England is mandated by the Government to make sure that specific and targeted education and training are introduced for all pathologists, including taking forward the developments arising from the 2014 pathology quality assurance review by Dr Ian Barnes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby mentioned post-mortem imaging. The all-party group recommended that the Government monitor the efficacy of post-mortem imaging, which in some cases can provide an alternative to the conventional invasive post-mortem examinations. The MOJ and the Department of Health are keeping up to date with developments in this procedure through their membership of the national post-mortem imaging board.

The all-party group highlighted the need for death certification reform. On 10 March, the Department of Health launched its consultation, which is entitled, “Introduction of Medical Examiners and Reforms to Death Certification in England and Wales: Policy and Draft Regulations”. As my hon. Friend has said, the proposed reforms will introduce, for the first time, a unified system of scrutiny by independent medical examiners of all deaths in England and Wales that are not investigated by a coroner. This development will strengthen safeguards for the public, make the process simpler and more transparent, and improve the quality of certification and mortality data. An eye is being kept on the delays that he has referred to; the Department of Health is watching that issue very closely. At the moment, it is probably too early to determine what the impact of the consultation will be, but the consultation is certainly on everyone’s horizon.
Caroline Dinenage

With regard to the civil registration service, the all-party group will know that the Home Office responded to its recommendations on civil registrations on 1 February, and undertook to raise awareness of the group’s report with local authorities, which it did via a circular on 1 March.

The Government are very pleased that the all-party group recognised the Government’s commitment to reviewing cremation legislation. The MOJ published our consultation on cremation on 16 December last year, seeking views on changes; the consultation was really aimed at improving cremation practice. The consultation closed on 9 March and the responses are now being analysed by a team in the MOJ. We plan to publish our response to the consultation as soon as possible.

On 16 March, the Department for Communities and Local Government published a consultation on the provision of crematoriums and related facilities, to establish whether they meet the demands and cultural requirements of all communities. This consultation closes on 26 May and DCLG will use it to establish whether the concerns that have been raised are as widespread as has been suggested.

We are aware that a number of new crematoriums have been established over the past three years—on average, one new crematorium is being built every three months—because new crematoriums have to report their opening to the Secretary of State for Justice. So we are keeping an eye on that issue, too.

With regard to coroner reforms, the need to place bereaved people at the heart of the coroner service was the key aim of the reforms implemented in 2013. One of those reforms introduced the post of Chief Coroner. Judge Peter Thornton QC was appointed as the first Chief Coroner, and he has played a central role in issuing guidance for coroners. Coroners are now required to conclude an inquest within six months of a death and they must report coroner investigations that last for more than 12 months to the Chief Coroner, so that he can refer to them in his annual report.

For bereaved people, probably the most significant development under the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 has been the “Guide to Coroner Services”, which is a booklet published by the MOJ. It sets out how a coroner’s investigation is likely to proceed, as well as the standards of service that bereaved people can expect to receive from a coroner’s office, and what they can do if those standards are not met.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby generously pointed out, I have the coroners portfolio and I share his wishes that the matters he has raised are resolved as quickly as possible. However, he understands that the operational responsibility for coroners services is a matter for the appropriate local authority, while my Department has responsibility for coroner law and policy. As frustrating as that situation can sometimes be, it is for the relevant local authorities to decide how to fund and run their coroner service.

Mark Pawsey: My hon. Friend the Minister is drawing our attention to the very broad range of agencies that are involved in this area. Is there any way that these different authorities and Departments can be brought together to improve communication between them?

Caroline Dinenage: That is certainly the case in the pan-London service that we have been looking at; we have been bringing all the different constituent authorities together in one room to discuss matters. We hope that guidance on the lessons learned from that process can be rolled out to other parts of the country.

I am really very grateful to my hon. Friend, the other members of the all-party group and all those who provided evidence to the group’s report. It is a comprehensive analysis of the range of services that bereaved people may have to deal with when they are faced with the death of a loved one, and for me its recommendations underscore the need for the Government to ensure that these services meet the needs of users and bereaved families at what will always be a very difficult time. I am also very grateful to him for bringing this matter to the House today.

Question put and agreed to.
Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered services at Ealing Hospital.

Mr Sharma: It is a great pleasure to have secured this debate and I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I am grateful to you and to Mr Speaker for providing the opportunity to debate this important matter. I am also delighted to see the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), here in Westminster Hall today.

Last week, on 26 April, I presented in the main Chamber a petition organised by a local group in my constituency and signed by more than 100,000 people, which said:

“The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons urges the Government to reconsider the impact of the Shaping a Healthier Future programme on Ealing Hospital, Ealing and the surrounding boroughs that rely on Ealing Hospital to deliver high quality emergency care 24 hours a day.”—[Official Report, 26 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 1404.]

I have outside the room quite a few organisers and other constituents who are visiting from Ealing and hope to see some outcome from the debate today.

The London Borough of Ealing is one of the fastest-growing areas in the city of London. West London is experiencing fantastic population growth, as people flock to join our vibrant multicultural business hub.

Ealing, and Ealing hospital, are at the heart of that growth. London is a demanding city—we know that from living here—but it is not just demanding regarding lifestyle and culture, it makes demands on health and the population demands a lot from its healthcare providers. Across the west of the city, in particular, we have a high level of young people, but the area also suffers from one of the highest levels of lifestyle-led premature death. It is a scandal that we in this great city preside over such a high rate of child poverty, while London drives the British economy.

In 2011, in what I can only assume was a well-meant but ill-founded attempt to improve the situation, the “Shaping a healthier future” programme was implemented across Ealing and the surrounding boroughs. “Shaping a healthier future” looked to combine services in certain hospitals to make savings and to improve 24-hour care, but the reconfiguration and rationalisation were often little more than cover for closing services. For the past few years, local people—the Minister can see that many of them are here today—including people from different walks of life and different political backgrounds and beliefs, west London MPs, Ealing Council members and Dr Onkar Sahota, the Labour spokesperson on health in the London Assembly and chair of its health committee, have repeatedly spoken out against what is being done to Ealing hospital.

We were threatened with the loss of four of our local 24/7 blue-light A&E units. Ealing hospital is expected to lose its full A&E service and have it replaced by a service that is not fit for purpose and cannot guarantee the safety of Ealing residents. Despite the increasing birth rate across our area of London, we lost our maternity unit last summer. That loss means that no more children will be born in the London Borough of Ealing. I must declare my interest in Ealing hospital. Two of my three grandchildren, Aatish and Riah, were born there, and I can vouch for the quality services provided. The paediatric unit is scheduled to lose in-patient services this summer. The iniquity of cuts that threaten the health and wellbeing of our youngest is a betrayal of every Ealing resident.

Shirlyn, a single working mother in my constituency, wrote to me last week to ask me to “do [my] best to fight this”.

She cannot believe that vulnerable children are being put at risk by cuts. Shirlyn is worried, just as every parent across Ealing must be, that in the case of an emergency the increased travelling time risks increasing the danger children are in. The loss of that key community asset means that the most vulnerable families, those that have children with serious long-term medical conditions, will spend longer travelling, which will threaten their ability to both work and see their sick child. What kind of society can stand by and make someone choose between putting food on the table and seeing their sick child? As Shirlyn says, we in Ealing have paid our taxes and we have not been listened to.

As each successive round of downgrades and closures is announced, public trust in the London North West Healthcare NHS Trust falls further. Public confidence is so low, and people so frustrated at being ignored, that many are worried the hospital will be completely closed and sold for housing. That creates an unsafe situation for the people of west London, and for my constituents in Ealing, Southall.

Accompanying investments were supposed to balance the situation, but as costs have spiralled to more than £1 billion, promised investments have been threatened with withdrawal. Part of the deal for Ealing hospital had been that a new, fit-for-purpose, community style hospital would be built, providing high-quality services in a modern, clean and safe environment. In 2014, Ealing Council, along with others served by the London North West Healthcare NHS Trust, established a commission headed by Michael Mansfield, QC. The independent commission almost universally condemned the results of “Shaping a healthier future”. It found that cuts were affecting the poorest in society most acutely, and that the public had not been properly consulted. Plans had been drawn up that just could not deliver for Ealing. There was no sustainable business plan and the reconfiguration did not offer value for money, and was not affordable or deliverable.

The most important adjustment that can be made now is that the Secretary of State step in and halt the current programme, which is risking lives. The experiment is failing my constituents in Ealing, Southall. Michael Mansfield, QC and his independent commission recommended that a full A&E service be reintroduced at Ealing hospital, and that the maternity unit be reopened. The report also noted that local GP and out-of-hospital services were overwhelmed. Investment in public health is the only way we can end this shame, and give back to Ealing residents the healthcare they deserve. By helping young people and those who are mentally ill, and not
allowing thousands more to slip into homelessness—as the Mayor has across all of London—we can help the health of everyone.

In January last year, I asked the Prime Minister to consider implementing Labour’s plan to employ a further 8,000 GPs to ease the workload for the most stretched services. Despite agreeing that GP care is fundamental to providing proper healthcare, he dismissed the plan and we are now seeing the results of his complacency.

London does not just have younger people putting pressure on healthcare services. The population at the other end of the spectrum is growing, and by 2031 there will have been a 40% increase in the over-80s population. That means that London, and Ealing, have to be better than many other parts of the country. We have to face the challenges not as problems but as solutions to the significant health inequalities that exist in our city. In 2013, the Mayor of London launched the London Health Commission, which published its report near the end of 2014. Although it suggested many important changes to NHS services, and outlined many noble intentions, the picture for London is only worsening.

That is why the Government have to step in. I ask the Government, on behalf of the more than 100,000 people who signed the petition and the many more who could not sign it but are worried about the services, that the current programme of rationalisation be halted. Services that are not adequately supported must be supported and reopened. Patient safety has to be the ultimate litmus test, and currently that cannot be guaranteed. As my constituent said:

“Every child is important and this move is putting the lives of these children at risk. Children need A&E.”

The people of the London borough of Ealing and surrounding areas need fully resourced and supported hospitals that provide a full service. Those hospitals need to be supported by the Government for the benefit of the local community.

Several hon. Members rose—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Dr Rupa Huq, I would like to explain the timetable for this hour-long debate. I would like to call the Opposition spokesperson at approximately 2.15 pm, and I expect him to take five minutes. Then the Minister can respond, leaving a minute or so for the proposer of the debate to reply. We seem to have plenty of time.

1.40 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour, the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), on securing this important debate. It was the consolation prize for a petition that had more than 100,000 signatures. Initially, that petition went to the Petitions Committee. The number of signatures demonstrates how the Ealing hospital issue has gone beyond being a little local difficulty. It is now a national scandal.

Mr Stringer, I do not know what it says in your diary for 18 May. For MPs from all parts of the House, it says, “State opening of Parliament”. Despite the legislative programme coming our way, it is usually a joyous occasion. It has pomp and circumstance, and we may get a sighting of Her Majesty the Queen. It is also, however, the day when the Ealing clinical commissioning group will take the decision to shut the door on children’s services at Ealing hospital. For people in Ealing, it will be a sad day.

It is not yet a year that I have been a Member of Parliament, but some of the subjects that come up in relation to Ealing hospital seem depressingly familiar, even to me as a newbie. We seem to have this common situation when the Government just will not budge. Their intransigence makes it all seem a bit like groundhog day. I was a Labour candidate for 18 months before I was elected, and the NHS was the No. 1 issue on the doorstep. We were told that we were fearmongering. I remember we had a big march—a demonstration—from Ealing hospital to Ealing common, which is a number of miles on the map. We warned that the A&Es at Hammersmith and Central Middlesex would be closed, and we were told that we were fearmongering. They have both gone now, closed in September 2014. That was euphemistically called “changes”. Everyone had a leaflet through the door talking about “changes” when it meant “closures”.

In the run-up to the election, I did several hustings where I warned that maternity was next for the chop at Ealing hospital. Again we were told that we were scaremongering and that it was a scare story, but on the other side of my election that closure sadly came to pass. One of the first things I did as an MP was table an early-day motion about it, which my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall signed. I think my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) was the first non-Ealing MP to sign that early-day motion, which asked for the Government to think again and condemned the closure.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall pointed out, Ealing is a young borough. It needs maternity services. Those services closed at Ealing hospital in June, and paediatrics is next, because we cannot have a children’s ward without maternity services, and maternity is gone. There is a fear that there is a domino effect—that these things consequently happen one after another. It creates a climate of fear and uncertainty among the staff and the patients. Many of the mums who had births in the middle of last year were uncertain as to whether the maternity services would be there. The closures are demoralising and out of step with the needs of the wider west London area.

As an academic by trade, I believe in evidence-based policy, and the evidence is that Ealing borough has a population of 360,000 people and rising. That is as big as a city like Leeds. The borough needs accident and emergency services, maternity and a children’s ward. There was a meeting at Richmond House, which I think my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) attended, along with the Minister. It was a good meeting on the whole, but the PowerPoint we were shown confirmed that Charing Cross and Ealing will be downgraded to minor hospitals. The House of Commons Library confirmed to me this morning that the population of London as a whole is projected to rise to 10 million, so surely we need more capacity, not less.

The bill for the “Shaping a healthier future” reconfiguration programme keeps rising. I think it is £235 million at present. Some £35 million has been
spent on management consultants, such as McKinsey and all those people. It does not look like good value for the taxpayer. We are living in an age where every pound of public money spent has to be justified, and the end result of this programme will be fewer acute beds and fewer hospitals, with A&Es in west London decimated. It is a bad deal all round. There is other evidence of that. I am not someone who likes to trot out loads of statistics, but waiting times are massively up at Northwick Park, which is seven miles away from bits of Acton in my constituency. In the immediate aftermath of the closure, it had the worst recorded A&E waiting times in England for six out of 15 months.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall has alluded to the Independent Healthcare Commission for North West London headed by Michael Mansfield, who is a respected QC and who has expressed concerns about the business case. Forget all the emotional stuff; he is looking at whether it is a good deal for the taxpayer, and he has called the business case “deeply flawed”. I pay tribute to the tireless work of Eve Turner and Oliver New, who have formed an organisation—it keeps changing names: it was Save Our Hospitals, then Save Ealing Hospital Ealing Hospital Ealing Hospital Ealing Hospital, Judy Breens, who have formed an organisation—it was Save Ealing Hospital, then it was Save Our Hospitals, then it was Save Ealing Hospital.

The petition, which was batted back by the Petitions Committee, talks about “a peaceful occupation at the Maternity Wing Area”.

That is how bad things have got. It also states: “Protests are growing and the anger is reaching boiling point amongst thousands of members of the community.”

These people were not political before this issue came up. It has politicised the chattering classes of Ealing behind their net curtains, not that I am dismissing people with net curtains. They are a completely valid form of internal decoration and I love them dearly. The issue has managed to inflame people who are not usually inflamed and who have never been on a demonstration.

Mr Virendra Sharma: I am sorry to intervene when my hon. Friend is in full flow, but it is important to make the point that the campaign is non-partisan. All the political parties on Ealing Council unanimously support it and more than 100,000 people signed the petition. Many hundreds of people actively went around their areas asking for signatures. It is important to understand that the campaign is not led by any political party.

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend puts it very well. I completely accept his point. The strength of feeling about this issue is palpable. It is a non-partisan thing; they are people who have never been on a protest march before.

Talking of protest marches, a couple of weeks ago I joined the junior doctors on the picket line outside Ealing hospital. Some of those people are in the Public Gallery today. We were last together on that day, so we have been reunited. Quite aside from imposing a contract on junior doctors—a contract is not a contract unless there is offer, acceptance and agreement—there are so many other issues with the junior doctors’ strike that should be raised here, such as the fact that they are patronisingly called junior doctors, as if they are the work experience person who makes the tea. They are very experienced people with years and years of clinical experience. Calling them junior doctors is almost a way of belittling them.

I raised the plight of those highly experienced, yet technically junior, doctors with the Prime Minister at Prime Minister’s questions recently. The Government’s equality impact assessment of the new contract shows that it discriminates disproportionately against women because childcare costs more at the weekend, and if weekend hours are counted as normal hours, women will have to pay. Again, the issue was batted back and just shoed away, which is disappointing because the Government’s own advice tells them about the costs. It feels as though junior doctors are being stretched ever thinner, and if something is stretched ever thinner, it can snap.

I wanted to be brief today because I have spoken many times on Ealing hospital both here and in the main Chamber. This morning I asked the Library staff whether they had a briefing pack on the 1.30 debate on Ealing hospital and they said, “Again? You’re always speaking on this. You had three hours on this subject on 24 March,” for which they did prepare a briefing. One would think that after umpteen debates, I would have said all I have to say on this subject, but the tale gets worse and worse.

I have mentioned before the cases of constituents facing long waits: for example, the Khorsandi and Anand families. The last time I faced the Minister in this Chamber, I mentioned my constituent Bree Robbins’s three-year wait for breast reconstruction. She was disappointed she did not get an answer last time, but maybe we can try again today. People have legitimate concerns.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall, for me Ealing hospital is personal. It is where I would have been born, but I was born in 1972 and it did not exist then. However, I remember that hospital going up with so much hope attached to it, and now I see it constantly being downgraded. As my hon. Friend says, the suspicion is that it is on the way out. I have been to the acute medical unit in the basement with my mum; I have been to the hospital as a mum; it is where in September 2014 my father breathed his last. So this hospital is not a hypothetical thing on a spreadsheet; it is something that I and family members use.

Recently, 11 north-west London Labour MPs, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas), signed a letter calling for the National Audit Office to investigate. There is a question of economics. We want the Minister to think again, consider the business case and halt the closure programme. The case simply does not add up.

As I said, I remember the hospital going up and I remember, as will my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall, several schools in the Borough of Ealing that were closed in the ‘80s when rolls were falling. The place in Greenford—I cannot remember its name—where they send school governors on training courses is a disused school, but now schools in Greenford are having to be opened. The Priory Centre in Acton was a community centre in a disused school. Now it has been razed to the ground and a brand-new primary school built, because numbers are going up. The short-sightedness flies in the face of the evidence and ignores the fact that populations are rising.
I do not have any hospitals in my constituency, although I had several on the edges: Central Middlesex, where the A&E has gone, Hammersmith hospital, where the A&E has gone, and Charing Cross, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), which is going to be downgraded. Although I do not have hospitals in my constituency, all those ones that were there on the edges are disappearing before our eyes, so I urge the Minister, who I know is a reasonable person and a London MP, to think again.

1.54 pm

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be here this afternoon under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. Although the debate is difficult, it is a great pleasure to follow my two neighbours from the London Borough of Ealing, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) for securing this debate today. As the MP for Ealing hospital, no one has done more than he has to champion the cause of that hospital over the four years that it has been under threat. As we see from the petition that generated this debate—not the first petition of this size—he is admirably and clearly reflecting the view of the vast majority of people not only in Ealing borough but across west London.

Apart from their choice of Member of Parliament, the constituency of my hon. Friend for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) may be one of the most unlucky in the country. To lose one A&E department may be considered unfortunate; to lose four must be an all-time record. Following the closures of Central Middlesex and Hammersmith and the downgrading of Ealing and Charing Cross to non-type 1 status, her constituents will be in a very difficult position, as will all our constituents.

I am here today for two reasons. I am not an Ealing MP, but I want to support my colleagues and I want to say—I think the Minister will accept this—that the proposals for Ealing hospital are inextricably linked, under the “Shaping a healthier future” programme, to the future of the eight other major hospitals in west and north-west London, four of which, as we have seen, will undergo substantial change and either closure or downgrading of services, or at least movement of services elsewhere.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton said, we have debated this subject many times. I do not think that is surprising. I make no apology for that, given the importance of the issue. In the recent debate in March, which was an across-London debate, “Shaping a healthier future” was raised several times. One of the matters on which I and others pressed the Minister was when we would see the next developments. I was grateful when the Minister said that Members would have the next important document—the draft of the implementation business case—as soon as possible.

Since that debate we have also managed to fix a date, 25 May, for the 11 MPs to meet the health service management across north-west London. Unfortunately, I have been told by my clinical commissioning group that the document will not be available for the meeting, although it will be available later in the summer. The sooner we can see that document and have an update on what the proposals are for Ealing and the other hospitals, the better. I say that because this will be familiar not only to Members here, but to the many people in the Public Gallery. The difficulty we have had over the past four years is a lack of information.

We began with the bombshell proposals in the summer of 2012, which effectively proposed the closure of Ealing and Charing Cross hospitals, leaving just a primary care facility on the site. There was a modification when the final proposals were brought forward in February 2013. Those proposals—which most of us regarded as a fig leaf, albeit a very expensive fig leaf—were for the demolition and disposal of a substantial portion of the site, but with the building of new facilities, primarily for primary care and some other treatment, while still using the majority of emergency and acute services on the site. Since then, nothing. Indeed, we have been waiting a couple of years for the business case. In the place of factual information, rumours tend to spread. As was mentioned previously, nothing has changed.

As for Ealing hospital, the very strong rumour is that, given the poor financial condition of the NHS and the scepticism of the Treasury about the programme, it is likely that the service cuts and reconfigurations will go ahead, but also that the existing buildings will be retained. Those buildings were not designed for the purposes for which they will now be used and will not receive the funding to modernise them that was at least the mitigation in the previous proposals. The sooner we know one way or the other on that, the sooner we can have a proper discussion about it. The news that Imperial will have a £50 million deficit this year—I think the situation for north-west London hospitals is even worse—suggests that the financial imperative is continuing to drive this.

Although the health service itself may have been quiet—certainly in what it has told Members and the public—my constituents and those of my hon. Friends have not been quiet over the past few years. As I say, the petition that generated this debate is not the first petition of more than 100,000 signatures that has been lodged. I hope that more attention is paid to this one than has been paid to previous ones. I pay tribute to the thousands of people who have not only signed petitions but been active in the campaign, which is going into its fifth year. The uncertainty is not helping anyone.

The public, the organised campaigns and the local authorities have acted responsibly. The local authorities commissioned the Mansfield report, a serious document that was not taken seriously enough by the NHS. The level of demoralisation is extremely high, and is combined with issues relating to the junior doctors’ dispute. Places such as the Imperial College school of medicine are centres of excellence for training junior doctors. I have spoken many times to the staff there and their morale is very low. All staff morale is very low because people do not know where they are going to be working or what job they will have. They do not know whether the facilities they are working in will survive, or whether they are going to be run down in the meantime. Consequently, we have a substantial overreliance on agency staff. That is not a good template for the NHS.

I appreciate the fact that there are financial difficulties throughout the country and that the situation in west and north-west London is not unique. Nevertheless, I
do not think that any other areas have had to put up with this reorganisation—or whatever we want to call it—for as long as we have.

Dr Huq: When my hon. Friend made the point about the loss of four A&E departments, he reminded me of the saying, “Once is unfortunate, twice is a coincidence, but three times is beginning to look like a habit.” I do not believe that any saying even goes up to four. Does he agree that it is unprecedented to lose four A&E departments?

Andy Slaughter: Yes, I do. I anticipate that we are unlikely to get much by way of an answer from the Minister today, although I will be delighted if she does have some news to impart. I hope she will take the debate in the spirit it has been conducted, because there is genuine anxiety. What we are asking for and what will help is transparency. It may be that we do not like what we hear any more than we liked what we heard three or four years ago, but it is getting beyond a joke now.

We talk a lot about hundreds of millions of pounds of money and about people’s love for institutions such as hospitals, but if we are pragmatic about it, at the end of the day the important thing is whether individuals receive a good standard of care. By coincidence, this morning I spent half an hour on the phone to a constituent whose husband’s life was saved two years ago when he had a serious aneurism. They were told by the professor who operated on him that had they taken a few moments longer to reach Charing Cross hospital, which they live very close to, that would have been the end.

The rider to that is that last week the same gentleman was rushed to Charing Cross hospital again with a recurrence of that issue. He spent seven hours there before being transferred to St Mary’s in Paddington, where he again received very good treatment. I hear again and again that the system is beginning to break down and people are not necessarily taken to the right place at the right time or, when they do get there, they are not seen quickly enough. That is not a criticism of the staff, who are working extremely hard against the odds and are highly professional.

We are very lucky to have such world-class hospitals in west London. We do not take that for granted, but I have given just one example of the kind of story I could probably repeat every week. I worry about the future of the health service for my constituents and those of my colleagues if we do not get to grips with the situation again and again that the system is beginning to break down and people are not necessarily taken to the right place at the right time or, when they do get there, they are not seen quickly enough. That is not a criticism of the staff, who are working extremely hard against the odds and are highly professional.

We are very lucky to have such world-class hospitals in west London. We do not take that for granted, but I have given just one example of the kind of story I could probably repeat every week. I worry about the future of the health service for my constituents and those of my colleagues if we do not get to grips with the situation. We are drifting in a way that means that the health service for my constituents and those of my colleagues if we do not get to grips with the situation.

Dr Huq: I have given just one example of the kind of story I could probably repeat every week. I worry about the future of the health service for my constituents and those of my colleagues if we do not get to grips with the situation.

2.5 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) on securing this extremely important debate and on the eloquent way he introduced it. He is widely known in this place for championing issues on behalf of his constituents; his contribution today will only further enhance that reputation. He presented a comprehensive picture of his constituency, rightly highlighting the scandal of health inequalities there and his concern about the implications for patient safety of the Government’s proposals. He cited staggering figures for the growth in elderly population in his area—not unique, but by no means to be ignored. He expressed his concern that the most vulnerable and those whose children have long-term conditions will have to travel further to access services, with possible negative implications for their economic situation. It is clear from what he said that he and his constituents have lost confidence in the process.

I draw attention to the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq). She is new to this place but is fast gaining a reputation as a Member who assiduously represents her constituents. She described the Government’s response as intransient. If that is her experience, I am sure it is no reflection of the effort she has put in. She compared Ealing to the city of Leeds, and it is unthinkable that a city the size of Leeds would not have such fundamental health services as those being discussed today. She described what has been presented to us over the past few years as a bad deal all round. As an academic, she has based her comments on the evidence she has seen, not on opinion. She and my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall both expressed concern that Ealing hospital is on the way out. Those were not careless comments thrown about for political gain but genuine anxieties born out of what they see and hear.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) correctly said that the sooner the business plan for further implementation is available, the better. He identified the lack of information as a factor that has made the situation far more difficult than it could have been. As he says, where there is a vacuum, something will fill it. In this case, the vacuum has been filled by rumours—rumours so strong that two of my hon. Friends have felt compelled to raise them here today. He said that transparency will help; I certainly agree with that. I also agree that our concerns are no reflection on the hard work and valuable contribution that our NHS staff make each and every day.

More than 100,000 people have now signed the petition to express their concern about service downgrades and what they see as a real threat to the future of Ealing hospital. Their concerns relate to the “Shaping a healthier future” programme, which was launched in 2011 by a group of what were then 10 primary care trusts, “to reshape hospital and out of hospital health and care services in North West London.” Following the abolition of primary care trusts, the North West London Collaboration of Clinical Commissioning Groups has led the programme. It has proposed a number of extremely significant changes, including the downgrading of accident and emergency services at a number of hospitals.

In 2013, Ealing Council’s health overview and scrutiny committee referred the programme to the Secretary of State, who concluded that changes to NHS services in north-west London should proceed. In a statement, the Secretary of State said that five of the nine hospitals—Hillingdon, Northwick Park, West Middlesex, Chelsea and Westminster, and St Mary’s—would provide comprehensive, seven-day-a-week acute emergency care. He also stated that A&E departments at Ealing and Charing Cross hospitals would remain open, although with what—as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton pointed out—he euphemistically called changes to the “shape or size” of services. Those
changes have probably not turned out as people hoped. Changes were recommended to replace the A&E services of Hammersmith and Central Middlesex hospitals with urgent care centres, which were subsequently implemented in September 2014.

In 2013, it was decided that maternity services would be consolidated on to six hospital sites and maternity deliveries at Ealing hospital would cease. We have heard from my hon. Friends how significant that has been for their communities. The maternity unit at Ealing hospital was closed in July 2015. It has now been recommended that in-patient paediatric services should also be moved to maintain appropriate staffing levels. These changes have, understandably, caused great public concern, which in 2014 led to Brent, Ealing, Hounslow, and Hammersmith and Fulham Councils establishing an independent commission under Michael Mansfield QC to review the impact of the changes to the north-west London health economy and to assess the impact of planned changes.

On 2 December 2015, the commission published its final report, which was extremely critical of the “Shaping a healthier future” programme, finding that inadequate consultation had been undertaken and that departments had been shut without providing adequate alternative healthcare. Its recommendations included halting the SHF programme and that local authorities should consider a legal challenge. The Government’s response states that they are “clear that reconfiguration of front line health services is a matter for the local NHS.”

It is clear from answers to parliamentary questions and a Westminster Hall debate on 24 March that both the CCGs and the Government do not accept the review’s findings.

The principle that decisions should be made locally by clinicians is sound, but there seems to be an issue about accountability in this case, as there is a clear feeling among the public and local politicians that their concerns are simply not being heard. Those who gave evidence to the commission were not fly-by-nights. Many were working on the front line of the services under discussion. Indeed, they are the local clinicians the Government say should be making the decisions. What recourse do clinicians, the public and patients have if they disagree so fundamentally with what is being done as we have seen here?

The most successful service reconfigurations are those where consultation is most effectively carried out and where support from clinicians at all levels, local politicians and, of course, members of the public is secured. It is no coincidence that when public concern is at its present level in Ealing and the surrounding communities, we tend not to see successful changes in provision.

Such was the frustration and concern about the changes that four local councils thought it necessary to use local taxpayers’ money to commission an independent report. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith said, the local authorities involved have behaved responsibly in commissioning this report. I do not believe there is any suggestion that they have behaved irresponsibly, so surely the Minister must acknowledge that taking this extraordinary step means that something must have happened that deserves further examination.

I turn to some of the recommendations in the independent report. Serious concerns have been raised about the consultation in 2012. There has been no significant further consultation since. Given that we are now four years on from that point and that the scheme has undergone considerable changes, as has the demographic make-up of the communities, it seems reasonable to consider a further period of consultation.

Concern was also expressed in the Mansfield commission’s report and here today about transparency, particularly in the business case on which the SHF scheme is based. I would welcome the Minister’s observations on both points, and if, like me, she is not satisfied that there has been sufficient public involvement, will she step in and ensure that that takes place before further downgrades or closures and that it is genuine consultation predicated on release of the full business case? Genuine consultation cannot take place if vital information is withheld. Transparency is the key to meaningful engagement.

The commission was asked to look at deteriorating standards in three local NHS trusts that were consistently failing to meet key targets, including that 95% of patients attending A&E must be seen, treated and admitted or discharged within four hours. The Minister will be aware that after six years of a Conservative Government, February’s figures are the worst on record for A&E waiting times. The most recent figures confirm that all three NHS trusts covering this area are failing to meet their targets.

In major A&E units, London North West Healthcare NHS Trust saw just 76% of patients within four hours and Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust saw 69.1%. Does the Minister agree with the commission that the closures of Hammersmith and Central Middlesex A&E departments are responsible for these appalling figures, or is the Government’s overall record to blame?

Finally, the other key principle to which all service reconfigurations should adhere is that they should be based on clinical rather than financial need. They must represent what is in the best interests of the patients who access the services and not simply be a tool to balance budgets at any cost. In this case, because the Government have fundamentally lost control of NHS finances with 75% of trusts now in deficit, local people are understandably asking whether the serious financial hardship that the trusts face is forcing the CCGs to consider changes that they otherwise would not. Can the Minister assure us that no decision will be made in this case or any other on the basis of finance alone and that the interests of patients will remain the central focus at all times? It is clear that public confidence has been lost in this case, and it is simply not good enough for the Government to wash their hands of it. We urgently need an acknowledgement of those concerns and concrete plans to address them.
London MP, on securing this debate on an issue that is of concern to him, to his constituents, as we can see from the attendance in the Public Gallery, and, of course, to colleagues in neighbouring constituencies, who also contributed to the debate—not for the first time.

Before I address the issues raised, I would like to echo the words of others and pay tribute to those who work in our national health service. Despite the debates that we have in this place about reconfigurations and the like, all of us are united in praise of the dedication of those working on the frontline to provide first-class services to all in their care.

There is of course considerable ongoing interest in the changes in north-west London proposed under the “Shaping a healthier future” reconfiguration programme. It is worth stressing that those are not just changes to acute hospitals, but planned changes to the whole of that health economy. The aim has been to look at how it can best provide in the future for the local population.

Of course I acknowledge the concern expressed among local people and in particular by the Save Ealing Hospital Community Action Group. The hon. Member for Ealing, Southall will know that I responded in January to a petition by the action group, and I will respond in writing in due course to the latest petition that he has presented. But I want to make it clear that proposals and change on so large a scale as that taking place in north-west London are inevitably controversial. Major change is inevitably controversial, but we have always stressed, as did the shadow Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), that the reconfiguration of services is a matter for the local NHS. That is best organised and shaped by those who know the communities best, and with local clinicians right at its heart, rather than being dictated from Whitehall.

Let me deal with the Mansfield Commission report. On Thursday 14 January, the NHS North West London Clinical Board considered the report of the Independent Healthcare Commission for North West London, and the view of the clinicians on the board—local doctors and health workers—is that the current programme, which was designed by doctors and based on significant clinical data, evidence and experience, continues to offer the best outcomes, experience and equality of access to NHS services for all our patients. That is a direct quote from what they said. Having read the Mansfield report, I am not surprised that that was the conclusion of local health leaders. I take issue with a number of things said about that report, not least about its independence, but I want to use some of the time that I have this afternoon to deal with some of the substance of the concerns raised about services for people in Ealing. Some of the language used was very strong, and I want to try to set a few minds at rest by talking about some of the new services.

Before moving on to specifics about Ealing, though, let me deal with the implementation of the programme itself. The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), perfectly reasonably, exposed the case why it is important that people have certainty and transparency. Some colleagues referred to the meeting that I chaired last summer to try to reboot this process after the general election—with a degree of success, in terms of the contacts between Members. But on the proposals for capital works for both Ealing and Charing Cross hospitals, I have been assured that local health and social care partners are working together to produce a sustainability and transformation plan by the end of June 2016, and it is anticipated that details for those two sites will be included in that.

I have been honest enough before to say that I share hon. Members’ frustrations about delay. I quite understand why they want more certainty, and I fully expect NHS England and the “Shaping a healthier future” programme to keep me abreast of developments as we move towards the summer. I want to hear if there are any problems with hitting that timetable, because Members have a right to expect to get that information, so that they can respond to it, so please rest assured that I will continue to ask those questions.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith also talked about morale, and it is vital that we put on the record some of the ways in which good progress is already being made as part of the “Shaping a healthier future” programme. As I have said, better healthcare is not just about the acute sector, important though that is. For example, good progress has been made in developing primary and community services, and there are examples showing patients benefitting. GP practices across north-west London now offer more than 1 million people in the area extended opening hours on weekdays, from 8 until 8, and weekend access. That is vital for families’ peace of mind, as has been mentioned. GPs in Ealing now provide 19 new services, including anticoagulation services, electrocardiograms and some mental health services. Many more community services are now in place across all eight boroughs, so more patients can be seen closer to home.

Those are just some of the reasons why I do not recognise the description of the plans given by the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall. He used expressions such as “risking lives” and that is not what local doctors want to do or what the plans are about.

Dr Huq: Will the Minister give way?

Jane Ellison: I am sorry; I will not, because the hon. Lady made a long speech and I must respond to it.

At the heart of the plans is the fact that local clinicians want to provide more and better services, although delivered differently, it is true, from the way they may sometimes have been delivered in the past. That brings me to the focus on Ealing hospital. Of course I recognise the concerns associated with such significant changes as are proposed, and I take the point entirely that uncertainty, both for Members of Parliament and members of the general public, gives rise to concerns.

Ealing hospital will be redesigned as a 21st century facility for the local community. The hospital will have a local A&E and a 24-hour GP-led urgent care centre, with access to 24-hour specialist care, as well as a range of specialist services designed with the needs of the community in mind, such as a diabetes centre of excellence. The hospital will be a centre of excellence for other areas of care, such as elderly patients, those with long-term conditions and the most vulnerable members of the community, by integrating primary and secondary care with community and social care. It is common ground between all parties that that is how we will help to keep
people healthier in the future. So good news for patients is already beginning, in the changes.

On maternity services, some strong language was used in the opening speech about concerns for local mums and their babies. As has been pointed out, maternity services were consolidated in July across north-west London into six maternity units. Women from Ealing now have a choice in maternity services, with 30 antenatal sites across Ealing, including Ealing hospital, and six sites for delivery across north-west London. As a result, there has been a 10% increase in choice of midwifery-led units. I am told that 778 women had their maternity care safely transferred from Ealing to a new maternity unit of their choice with no incidents reported.

What is the benefit to Ealing women from the changes? Before the changes, Ealing hospital was achieving 60 hours of consultant cover—lower than all the neighbouring hospitals. Across north-west London before the transition, the average was 101 hours. North-west London has set out to achieve 123 hours in 2015-16, and it currently has 122 hours of consultant cover. Also, 100 new midwives have been recruited across north-west London as a result of the changes. Antenatal and postnatal care are still available at Ealing hospital, and as I said, the number of community midwives has also increased locally at 30 sites across Ealing. It is clear that a complex service change has been managed safely, with benefits to patients—mothers and their babies. It is telling—Members need not just listen to my words—that Ealing Council’s health and adult social services standing scrutiny meeting on 26 April heard from the Royal College of Midwives. That is not the Government. It endorsed the service change has been managed safely, with benefits to patients—mothers and their babies. It is telling—Members need not just listen to my words—that Ealing Council’s health and adult social services standing scrutiny meeting on 26 April heard from the Royal College of Midwives. That is not the Government. It endorsed the transition and congratulated the NHS in north-west London on the model of care and the detail in the transition. Again, I do not recognise that service in the hands of the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall, although I know that he meant them with due concern for his community.

On paediatric in-patient services, good progress is being made on the implementation of changes. I am informed that that will ensure that children in north-west London will receive consistently high-quality seven-day care, with more paediatric nurses and specialist doctors available. Paediatric in-patient services, which are for children who require emergency treatment or an overnight stay, will move on 30 June from Ealing hospital to five other hospital sites in north-west London. That will significantly expand capacity—more beds, doctors and nurses, seven days a week.

The changes do not mean that all children services are moving from Ealing. Nearly three quarters of existing children’s services will continue on the Ealing hospital site and elsewhere in the borough. Services remaining include routine appointments and treatments that do not require an overnight stay, such as day care unit activity, so most children will be seen in the same place as they are now. Urgent care for minor injuries and out-of-hours GP appointments will also remain at Ealing hospital. The majority of children who are brought to Ealing’s A&E by their family or friends are already treated in the urgent care centre. Services for children with long-term conditions, such as asthma and epilepsy, and child and adolescent mental health services will also remain unchanged.

To reiterate, 75% of existing children’s services will continue to be delivered by the dedicated staff of Ealing hospital, but—this is an important “but”—the sickest children in north-west London will receive better care as a result of the changes. That is what we all care about the most.

It is right that local people have the chance to hear from their parliamentary representatives in such debates, so I welcome the fact that we have had the chance to debate the subject again. I suspect that we will do so again at some point in the future. As the programme moves through its implementation, I encourage those with particular concerns to continue to engage with the local NHS. I thank colleagues for doing so, as they have been, because that is the right way to proceed. I have reiterated to local health leaders the need to share plans in a timely fashion. I only ask of hon. Members that they also share the positive changes that are already visible to people in their communities, as I have illustrated today. I look forward to hearing how the meeting later this month goes—it was referred to earlier—and I will continue to engage positively with colleagues as they handle this important issue, which matters so much, as we can see, to local members of the public.
The Gulf

9.30 am

Charlotte Leslie (Bristol North West) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered UK relations with the Gulf.

I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. In recent months, I have been lucky enough to go on two trips, to the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

For many years to come, any debate on the middle east such as this one will be prefaced by the phrase, “This could not be a more timely debate”—or at least until not a lot is going on in the middle east which, sadly, will not be any time soon. I am afraid that this debate, too, is particularly timely. Why? I could say economically, with the effects of the Iran deal to be seen in plummeting oil prices, making this a time of turmoil or of a renewables revolution for the region and all those who are linked with it.

I could say that it is a time for the west to be clearer to its historical allies about who its friends are. I could also argue for it to be a time to seize economic opportunities: in Dubai’s Jebel Ali port; the London Gateway—having the Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond), who has just taken her place, lobbied the rest of the delegates on a trip so excellently, but (Mrs Drummond), who has just taken her place, lobbied the UAE’s investment in Portsmouth—after my right hon. Friends the Members for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) and for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), and many others present today, who have far more experience in the region than me, will cover those topics magnificently.

I want to talk about a path less trodden, starting with some lines from a musical. In Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice’s “Jesus Christ Superstar”, a newly dead Judas accosts a soon-to-be-crucified Jesus with some slightly aggressive questions:

“Every time I look at You, I don’t understand…why’d you choose such a backward time

In such a strange land?
If you’d come today
You could have reached the whole nation
Israel in four BC had no mass communication.”

Those lines touch on something so fundamental to the Gulf and its politics that we cannot discuss the region without them. Yet western politics has such an inadequate currency of thought and language with which to discuss it: Islam and its values today.

Islam is a religion that is inseparable in its content from the Arab peninsula. In its own 1400s, it is now, perhaps, going through an enlightenment or reformation process that Christianity went through so brutally and bloodily in our own calendar’s medieval period. This reformation, however, is happening with AK47s, global travel and the internet—“mass communication”. As a result of global travel and mass communication, Islam’s internal challenges are not only the problem of the Gulf and the middle east, because Islam is now a European religion, too, so its challenges are challenges for everyone.

The west has been very good at debating political solutions using political institutions, and security solutions using military equipment. None of that, however, touches on what is going on at the heart of the faith of Islam—things that have become either a victim of language inflation through abstract noun overuse, or remarkably unfashionable: values. The UAE ambassador to Russia, his excellency Omar Saif Ghobash, put it to me strikingly, “We are politicising our ethics, when we should be ethicising our politics.”

In what could be called a western values vacuum, perhaps born of a bourgeois squeamishness about anything absolute in a relativist post-secular world, I have found that some of the most sophisticated understanding of extremism has come from the Gulf. In many ways that is not surprising, because Gulf nations have real skin in the game—the continuation of their very society in the face of the chaos around them.

Furthermore, Gulf nations are at home with, and understand in a way that the west finds hard to digest, the role of religion and faith and their values, as integral to politics and political thinking. For example, when I commented on the prevalence of conspicuous long-term thinking in the dialogue in the UAE, a Minister pointed out to me that it would be dishonourable for a leader not to leave a fine legacy of long-term thinking for the next generation. In Islam, the idea that man is here only for a season, and that it is his legacy that is important, is embedded in the way people think—a perfect example of where political thinking and faith are inseparable.

We are used to discussing—it is right to do so—how emerging middle eastern societies can benefit from the experience of the west in forging relatively stable, free-speech societies that respect human rights. I know that colleagues will have that discussion. We are also used to debating...
the military and economic collaborations that benefit both partners—I look forward to that discussion, too, and many Members present have great experience of that.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Will the hon. Lady comment on and take the opportunity to pay tribute to President Obama, in his last months as President of the United States of America, given his long-term thinking about the Gulf region? What legacy has he left to that region?

Charlotte Leslie: I do not envy President Obama’s role, given the legacy he was left with—a legacy of just how disastrous short-term and arrogant thinking can be, from the west invading Iraq. I was very against the Iraq war and, sadly, my preconceptions then, outside this place, can be testified to now. The ongoing role of America and the middle east’s lack of trust in that country will be a challenge that we must all meet. I also pay tribute to the work of John Kerry in beginning to forge some kind of relationship there, which is extremely difficult.

Some of the most sophisticated understanding of extremism that I have come across was at the UAE Hedayah centre, which is dedicated to examining extremism and its causes. Hedayah has deconstructed several political common misconceptions: first, that extremism is simply born of poverty—it is not; it is about much more than only poverty. To equate ending extremism with simply ending poverty is misleading and dangerous.

After all, Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian academic who inspired the takfiri thinking of al-Qaeda, was far from poor. I recommend anyone interested in the region and the birth of extremism to read him. His life and writings, from an early autobiography, “A Child from the Village”, to his later, explosive and famous book, “Milestones”, show that he felt isolated. A telling passage describes, in third person, his response to an event engraved on his heart that casts Daesh as the stale establishment and their hero? Where is the leader in that new subversive movement that does not work. In a political world in which we can seldom find any initial response to atrocities such as those in Brussels and Paris other than to tell the perpetrators that they are wrong and that they should not do them is pretty useless—I will insert a quote from the “Life of Brian”: “Don’t do it again!”—and we cannot be surprised when that does not work. The insights from the Gulf help clarify what our response should be and what our challenge is in forging that alternative to Daesh: a value system, identity, community and purpose that competes on providing welfare and a sense of risk and achievement. How do we build that compelling and exciting muscular moderation?

There is then perhaps an even more difficult question. Who is the forceful, charismatic leader of that muscular moderation: the daddy, the Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Zarqawi, the bin Laden or the Sayyid Qutb? Who is the hero? Where is the leader in that new subversive movement that casts Daesh as the stale establishment and their hatred as weak and infantile and promotes a rebellious and resolute compassion for those who are different from oneself—even those who do not like us—as the strong and manly thing to do?

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Does she agree that in the middle east, and in the Gulf in particular, irrespective of the motivation of those of us in the west, we are almost always seen to be trying to impose some sort of external values? We need to see the intrinsic beliefs and views of the people in the region,
who need to show leadership to take their communities out of the morass into which many of those nations have sunk in recent years.

**Charlotte Leslie:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that good point. We often forget that the messenger is frequently more important than the message itself, because the message is fundamentally defined by who gives it. He makes a point that I will touch on later.

A third insight, which I found striking and relevant to our relations with the Gulf, was offered by His Excellency Dr Anwar Gargash, the UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. He talks of the dangers of a digital world, where

“my opinion has become my religion”.

That observation speaks not only to the role of the internet in spreading Daesh’s message—the mass communication that Tim Rice’s Judas so lamented the lack of—but to fundamental changes in digital technology that appear to have an effect on people’s thoughts. I have called that a change from cogito ergo sum, I think therefore I am, to sentio ergo sum, I feel therefore I am—or even to sentio ergo est, I feel therefore it is. In that, a person’s feeling dictates absolute truth.

As MPs, we have all seen—on social media in particular—that dangerous trend and false premise that says, “I am human. I think this. You do not think what I think. Therefore you are not human.” That is a seed of genocide and the beginning of a takfiri mentality that extends its blind intolerance way beyond the scope of Islam. We are beginning to see that in the hate diatribes of UK far-left groups who are sympathetic to Hamas, Hezbollah and other extremist terrorist groups. That is a slippery slope.

All those insights are from the hard end of battling extremism in the Gulf. It is easy for the west to forget that the majority of Daesh’s casualties are Muslim and that Daesh wants to punish nations such as the UAE for “poisoning” the sacred Arab peninsular with pluralism. It is also easy to forget that Sunni Gulf states are concerned about the rise of an emboldened Shi’a militia as Iran re-enters the global economy.

The response of the Gulf to extremism may provide a learning opportunity for Britain. What assessment has the Minister made of the UAE’s clampdown on extremist teaching in schools and of its policy towards registering imams in Mosques? Are there lessons to be learnt from that? More specifically, will he keep an open mind on Britain’s classification of the Muslim Brotherhood? That would be an extremely good way of working out whether the UAE could not “export” its pluralism to neighbours simply by preaching. It could demonstrate the possibility of such a pluralism within a conservative Muslim state only by doing. I hope the debate will be in some way instrumental in Britain’s continuing to meet the challenge that it shares with the Gulf states across our differences, by listening, talking, understanding and doing.

I will finish by repeating a point that was made to me by the exceptional Minister of State for International Co-operation, her excellency Reem al-Hashimy, one of the incredibly impressive women Ministers in the highly conservative Muslim society of the UAE. She emphasised that the UAE could not “export” its pluralism to neighbours by preaching. It could demonstrate the possibility of such a pluralism within a conservative Muslim state only by doing. I hope the debate will be in some way instrumental in Britain’s continuing to meet the challenge.

I will not use my position as the only Labour Member in the debate to speak at length, but I want to make one or two points that I hope the Minister will have time to
respond to. Last night I read again the Foreign and Commonwealth Office report “Human Rights and Democracy”, which was published last month. Although it is a slimmed down volume and in many respects weakens the Government’s commitments on human rights—at least in relation to the death penalty—it does include three Gulf countries among the countries of concern: Saudi, Bahrain and Yemen. It does not include the United Arab Emirates, which I think is a significant omission. The Minister may want to mention human rights in the UAE when he responds.

I am glad that the countries in question are what they are now, I believe, called priority countries—another slightly euphemistic term. However, I am afraid the language that is used, particularly in relation to the Gulf states, does not match the seriousness of the human rights issue or the task that needs to be done. The Bahrain section of the report says

“there was progress on human rights”,

and mentions that the UK is providing “technical assistance”—which in some cases it is being paid for. We have just established a naval base in the country for the first time in decades. The report mentions that

“allegations of ill-treatment in detention continue”

and that there are concerns regarding

“freedom of speech and expression and peaceful assembly”.

However, little more is said than that.

As I mentioned, the report is entirely silent about the UAE, and that is regrettable. It is slightly more candid in relation to Saudi, particularly on the serious issue of executions, reminding us that 158 people were executed in 2015, which is a more than 15% increase on the previous year. On 2 January this year, 47 people were executed on one day, including three minors. There remain three minors on death row. They are Ali al-Nimr, Dawood al-Marhoon and Abdullah al-Zaher. Again, I ask the Minister, as I often do in written and oral questions, whether their cases have been raised again. I do not say, and have never said, that Gulf countries are, in either scale or degree, the worst offenders, but I do say that the Government operate a soft touch in dealing with such countries. We have just heard from the hon. Member for Bristol North West that it is often better to comment on such things in private, which I think is what the Foreign Office says about Saudi. I think it is right to raise them in private, but it is also right to speak out, and the Government have a moral obligation as an upholder of international human rights to do so.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is concentrating on human rights, but does he not attach any importance to the key role that the nations in question play in the battle against tyranny, and the long-standing support that they have given us and we have given them, historically? They are important allies of the United Kingdom and the hon. Gentleman is sending out the message that stability counts for nothing and that the only thing he is interested in is abuses by the authorities. I remind him that we have our own history. We took out 14 people on the streets of Northern Ireland. Does he regard that as a human rights abuse as well?

Andy Slaughter: I think you will forgive me, Mr Nuttall, if I do not stray into talking about Bloody Sunday this morning. The hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to make his points in his own way. I am simply setting out these matters, perhaps as a correction to others that will be raised this morning, and I think that is perfectly legitimate and reasonable. Of course we must have a relationship with countries overseas whose human rights records do not match our own, and of which we perhaps do not expect exactly the same standards. However, if the hon. Gentleman is saying we should not raise the issues, I cannot entirely agree with him.

To deal briefly with the UAE, the recent case of David Haigh, the former Leeds United managing director—[Interruption.] I am being heckled because I am taking some time. I will take a little more time. I said I would not speak for a long time, Mr Nuttall, but if I continue to be interrupted, perhaps I shall speak for rather longer. We will see where that goes. I think, particularly given that the Foreign Office did not address the matter in its human rights report, that it is worth putting it on record. Again, I will simply read some headlines. The first is from The Law Society Gazette: “Solicitor claims he was tortured in Dubai jail”. Another headline reads: “Businessmen held in UAE were tortured into confessions, says UN report”. I have mentioned the number of British nationals—37 in the last five years—who have made allegations of torture or mistreatment in detention in the UAE and the fact that there are 27 such detainees there at the moment.

has happened by setting up commissions whose recommendations are not implemented, and mounting an effective PR offensive.

I pay particular tribute to The Independent and The Guardian, which have sought to expose what happens in Bahrain. Headlines from the last couple of months include “Britain lobbied UN to whitewash Bahrain police abuses” and “British arms sales to Bahrain total £45m since Arab Spring—while claims of torture and oppression continue”. There is a lot more I could say about that, but I think the Minister gets the impression. I do not say, and have never said, that Gulf countries are, in either scale or degree, the worst offenders, but I do say that the Government operate a soft touch in dealing with such countries. We have just heard from the hon. Member for Bristol North West that it is often better to comment on such things in private, which I think is what the Foreign Office says about Saudi. I think it is right to raise them in private, but it is also right to speak out, and the Government have a moral obligation as an upholder of international human rights to do so.
I recently asked the Minister the following questions. Will the Prime Minister review the UK’s special relationship with the UAE in the light of the report by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention calling on the UAE to release several foreign nationals, including from Canada and the US, who it says have been detained arbitrarily, tortured and forced to sign confessions? Will the Government confirm that no further Arab Partnership Participation Fund moneys will be allocated to the UAE by the Foreign Office until a report has been conducted in the light of the recent statement by UN special rapporteur on torture, Professor Juan E. Méndez? His office has received credible information that detainees were tortured and forced to sign confessions, and his request for a country visit to the UAE is outstanding.

I mentioned David Haigh, a former managing director of Leeds United who I think is a member of the Conservative party. He was recently released from a UAE prison and, on returning to the UK, said that he had suffered ill treatment and abuse:

“I was punched around, I was hit, I was tasered. People attempted to sexually abuse me. I now have a problem with my eyes. You are constantly kept in the dark…it damages your eyes.”

He was imprisoned, incidentally, under the cybercrimes law—a particularly Orwellian statute that criminalises electronic abuse. There are well-documented incidents of human rights violations in the UAE.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood) indicated dissent.

Andy Slaughter: The Minister is shaking his head. Will he respond to those incidents?

Mr Ellwood: The reason I am shaking my head is that many other Members want to speak. They want to hear what the Minister and, indeed, the Opposition Front-Bench Members have to say on these matters. Your guidance was very clear, Mr Nuttall, on speeches being four minutes. I was shaking my head not about the substance of anything the hon. Gentleman is saying, but because he has now been speaking for 10 minutes.

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): I hear what the Minister has to say about the time limit. I am sure that the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) is about to draw his remarks to a swift conclusion. I am sure that the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) is about to draw his remarks to a swift conclusion. I am sure that the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) is about to draw his remarks to a swift conclusion. I am sure that the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) is about to draw his remarks to a swift conclusion. I am sure that the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) is about to draw his remarks to a swift conclusion.

Andy Slaughter: I will speak for half a minute on Yemen and then sit down, Mr Nuttall. I will just say, however, that I have been in Westminster Hall when Conservative Members have filibustered for an hour in order to prevent debates from taking place on issues of great importance to me. I do not intend to do that here. I do not think that a 10-minute speech for an Opposition Member is unreasonable, given the number of Government Members present.

Let me end by saying this. The Minister will be aware of the Select Committee on International Development report published today in relation to the need for an independent inquiry into what is happening in Yemen. UAE and Saudi forces are engaged, with British advice and support, in the civil war in Yemen. It is clear to anybody who reads what is written by those reporting from inside that troubled country that war crimes are being committed and that there are breaches of international humanitarian law. Will the Minister agree to the Committee’s recommendation of an independent investigation into what is happening in Yemen?

It is my view that we should have a suspension of arms sales to the countries engaged in that civil war, until it is demonstrated that breaches of international law are not happening. This country should not be complicit in matters of that kind and should certainly be asking for transparency in relation to what is happening in Yemen and, in particular, the involvement of other Gulf states in that country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): Order. I will now impose a three-minute time limit on all speeches, so that we can hear from as many Back Benchers as possible.

10.3 am

Sir Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Thank you, Mr Nuttall. I regret that we have seen two contrasting speeches this morning: one informed and thoughtful speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie), and one of an extraordinary lack of knowledge from the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who I fear has travelled little to these areas. He may be able to read reports but knows almost nothing from his own experience. I declare my interest: I am chairman of the Conservative Middle East Council. I have taken an interest in the region for 30 years. I want to make, in the two or three minutes I have, one major point.

We are looking at a period of greater instability and danger than I think we have ever known. The last four decades have seen conflict, war and fluctuating oil prices, but never before, until the last five years, have we really seen countries completely falling to pieces. Now, around the region, entire countries are falling apart, and the centuries-old lines in the sand are disappearing. Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya—and, for a moment, it looked like Egypt, too—have been unstable and disrupted as never before. We have seen the rise of non-state fanatics and space ungoverned by legitimate and decent authority. Sunni and Shi’a difference has been polarised by the fall of the Shah and the revolution in Iran. In addition to countries being pitted against one another, we are now seeing them completely fall apart.

That leads me to the one point I want to make—one that is totally lost on the hon. Member for Hammersmith. Our watchword should be stability. It is very easy to criticise Gulf countries from the ignorant comfort of a British armchair. It is very easy to slip into prejudicial judgmentalism, but these countries need to be understood. Their particular social composition, their historical origin and the nature of their regimes need to be understood. I suggest that that understanding sits on the Government’s side of the Chamber rather better than with the hon. Gentleman.

Our approach should be to hold the countries of the Gulf Co-operation Council together, to show respect and understanding and to work with them. Where
would the world be if they were not there governing as they do? They would be replaced by something far worse.

In the 30 seconds I have left, I add that I am the Government’s envoy to Yemen. I have been going to that country for 30 years. The hon. Gentleman has probably never visited it in his life. I have done so on a dozen or more occasions, and I look forward to continuing to work on the peace talks that are taking place in Kuwait at the moment. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will do its best to ensure that those peace talks are successful.

10.7 am

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. May I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on securing this debate? We are here to debate UK relations with the Gulf, but it will likely come as no surprise to the Minister that I would like to make use of my limited speaking time to focus largely on Saudi Arabia.

Although we maintain strong diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia, our values are ever more divergent. In 2016, it is legal for same-sex couples to marry across most of the UK. In 2016, Saudi Arabia remains one of only six countries to punish homosexuality with the death penalty. In the Saudi kingdom, women still need to be accompanied by a male guardian whenever they leave the house. Although 2016 marks 51 years since the abolition of the death penalty in Britain, we were all shocked at the start of the year by the brutal mass public executions of 47 people in Saudi.

Saudi Arabia is concurrently one of the world’s most repressive states and one of our closest allies. It is clear that a relationship with Saudi is prized as being strongly in British interests, but at what cost? Concerns about British arms sales to Saudi still loom large, and they are concerns that I share. The ongoing Saudi operation in Yemen has seen a shocking number of civilian fatalities. In total, more than 6,000 people have been killed since Saudi Arabia launched a multinational campaign a little over a year ago. Around half of those deaths are estimated to be of civilians.

Although Saudi Arabia has argued that it is making every effort to avoid hitting civilian targets, the UN believes that Saudi forces are causing twice as many civilian casualties as all the other forces fighting in Yemen. The UN describes the situation in Yemen as a humanitarian disaster, yet we continue to sell billions of pounds worth of weapons to the kingdom. One human rights organisation claims that UK-produced bombs were used in strikes on a ceramics factory in northern Yemen.

Sir Alan Duncan: The alternative was to allow that country to be taken over by force. Does the hon. Lady not appreciate that among the Houthis who have taken over the country, 25% of those carrying guns are probably child soldiers?

Margaret Ferrier: I take the right hon. Gentleman’s point, but he and I are on two different platforms concerning our relations with Saudi Arabia.

The humanitarian crisis in Yemen should shame us all. It requires an insurmountable effort to reconcile our aid efforts in the country with our continued arms dealings with Saudi Arabia. If there is any risk whatever of UK arms being used in breach of international humanitarian law, we should call an immediate halt to all arms sales until an in-depth, independent inquiry has been carried out.

Seema Kennedy: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Margaret Ferrier: No, I am sorry. More Members want to speak.

Saudi Arabia has a deeply troubling human rights problem. It would be remiss of me if I did not use this opportunity to speak up for Ali al-Nimr, Dawood Hussein al-Marhoon and Abdullah Hasan al-Zaher. These three young men were arrested and tried in the kingdom for crimes they allegedly carried out as juveniles. Although the Foreign Office has repeatedly assured us that it does not expect the death sentences to be carried out, they are still languishing in prison awaiting execution.

I do not expect us to impose our values and beliefs on another country, but I expect the UK to show some responsibility in our relations with Saudi. As our values widen even more, so does our responsibility to set a more progressive example. Today I ask the Minister to reconsider our dealings with Saudi Arabia. In February, the European Parliament voted by a large majority for an EU-wide embargo on arms sales to Saudi Arabia, but the Government have totally ignored that. I again ask them to heed calls for a ban on weapons sales.

10.11 am

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I refer Members to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on obtaining this debate and on her excellent speech.

In the short time available to me, I want to focus on two issues. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) mentioned stability, which I believe is the key to our relationship with the Gulf states. We must not forget that that relationship is twofold. On the one hand, they have a huge commercial interest in this country, as we have in their countries. For example, Emirates, the UAE airline, is by far the biggest customer for Airbus A380 aircraft, which are manufactured in north Wales. It has been calculated that Emirates’ investment in this country, via its purchase of Airbus aircraft, indirectly accounts for some 7,000 jobs. Our relationship is important and should not be undervalued.

The other issue is security. We have a huge interest in developing our relations with the Gulf states. They are at the sharp end of the battle against Daesh, which is a threat not only to the Gulf nations, but to this country. It is essential that this country develops relations with the Gulf states. When I visited Bahrain a few months ago, I was delighted to see that the British Government are investing in a new naval base there—HMS Juffair—and restoring our naval presence in an important part of the world.

In the few moments available to me, I want to mention the occupants of the other side of the Gulf in Iran, whom we often overlook when considering the Gulf.
Iran is undoubtedly a threat to the region’s peace. There is no doubt that it sponsors Hezbollah and the insurgency in Yemen, and is a threat to that region. Another role for the United Kingdom is to ensure that the Gulf states receive our assurances that we will be at their side in the ongoing battle against Iran and its threat to the stability of the region.

10.14 am

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on her thoughtful opening speech. I draw Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I was lucky enough to visit Bahrain and Saudi Arabia recently.

I have received some criticism for visiting those countries, but I feel very strongly that we should not be armchair commentators. I hope that everyone who has spoken this morning has taken the time and trouble to visit some of the countries we are talking about. MPs have amazing opportunities to do so. We are always aware that our visits are stage managed to some extent, but we learn a huge amount in the process. No amount of being told women’s rights are fantastic made up for me having to put on an abaya on the plane before walking off it. It was only a small thing, but for me it was part of the experience of being a woman in these countries, in contrast with my male colleagues, who just walked out in whatever they were wearing.

I want to make three brief points. First, we must not be simplistic or naive in the way we think about these countries and our relationships with them. It is not just a case of goodies against baddies, liberals against dictators, or those who care about human rights against those who do not.

I am sure that we all care about human rights. I certainly do, and I particularly want to make life better for millions of girls and women throughout the middle east. However, we must not be naive about the alternatives to the Gulf Governments with whom we have important relationships. We must not think that if we can oust a ruling family we will suddenly and magically get a liberal western democracy. Recent events in other parts of the middle east have surely taught us a lesson. Colleagues have referred to the importance of stability. When there is a vacuum into which an organisation can capitalise on.

My second point is that we must be aware of the extraordinarily challenging times for Gulf countries at the moment. Saudi Arabia is surrounded by conflict in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, where it is controversially but understandably involved, and Iran, which is stoking conflict in the region. That is coupled with the plummeting price of oil on which its economy has depended for some 70 years. It is an incredibly difficult time for those countries to maintain stability and, if we do not want them to fall apart, we must be thoughtful about our relationships.

There are reasons for optimism, but I do not have time to go into that. We must have a positive and constructive relationship with the Gulf states, which is in our interest as well as theirs.

10.17 am

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on securing the debate and on her powerful, thoughtful and eloquent speech, which was fantastic. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I joined my hon. Friend on her recent trip to the United Arab Emirates. I will not have time to say much about human rights and stability in the region. They are powerful issues that I cannot do justice to in three minutes. I will concentrate on one area: business relationships and our opportunities in countries such as the UAE.

During our recent trip, we visited the Emirates airline, which is headed up by Sir Tim Clark. He is a fantastic British businessman and I wish he were doing fantastic business in the UK. It is amazing to see inspirational business leaders expanding global businesses in places such as the UAE. With his UK links, Sir Tim recently did a deal to buy Rolls-Royce engines for the Emirates fleet. It was one of Rolls-Royce’s biggest deals. Our relationship with global companies around the world can tangibly benefit the UK.

We also went to Jebel Ali, the ninth biggest port in the world. It is owned by an Emirates company, DP World, which, as we have heard, also owns London Gateway. Who is the head of that? It is Simon Moore, another Brit, who has just gone back to Dubai to lead that organisation.

What that showed me was that we can have such entrepreneurship, coupled with the blank canvas that Dubai, Abu Dhabi and these countries have in their modern history, and a central location in the world as well. The Emirates are looking to move from an oil-based economy to a far more diverse economy. Their leading people are educated in the west and then go back, having been upskilled through the talent that they brought to the west. They will take on leading roles, but they will also look for other countries to trade with, for investment in and out of those countries. The UK is very well placed to do that—to offer services.

Bahrain has been mentioned. We have a 200-year relationship with Bahrain, the treaty of friendship having been signed in 1816. Again, that is something that we can capitalise on.

On women’s rights, it was fantastic to hear the example from my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), who talked about her experience. Strong female politicians going to these countries and people seeing, for instance, Reem al-Hashimi and Noura al-Kaabi, the fantastic Ministers that the UAE has, and using them as examples of how women in government and in business can have such a positive effect will help to bring change in other countries, such as Saudi Arabia.

10.21 am

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) for her amazingly erudite speech, which I will not be able to emulate. I, too, recently went
to the UAE as a guest of its Government. That is declared in my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

My interest in this area started when I was a child. My father served in the Trucial Oman Scouts in the 1950s and, as an Arabist, spent most of his career in the middle east, in Suez, Yemen and the UAE, which was called the Trucial States in those days. The beginning of the close links between Britain and the UAE has been documented in his book, “Arabian Adventure”, in which he discusses events in the 1950s and ‘60s, when he got to know Sheikh Zayed of Abu Dhabi, the founder of the UAE, through his weekly visits and recognised him as “undoubtedly the most powerful figure in the Trucial States”.

My father says:

“I used to visit him weekly in his fort, and he would always describe the local political situation to me in an excellent manner. I always came to him with great respect and I left him with even greater respect.”

I mention that because I want to reflect on our long-term and close relationship with the UAE, which was very obvious during our trip in April. Since 1972, when I left as a child, the UAE has developed incredibly. Out of the desert have risen several cities in each state, from Ras al-Khaimah, Ajman and Umm al-Qwain in the north, through to Sharjah, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Fujairah in the east. Those states have come together and work closely, the richer states sharing their wealth with those that have not had the oil reserves but are developing in other ways.

It is with British help that businesses have become so successful. During our visit, as we have mentioned, we met Sir Tim Clark, who built up the Emirates airline, which now sponsors the Emirates Spinnaker tower in Portsmouth, and Simon Moore, who is running Jebel Ali, the port on which Dubai originally built its wealth. Dubai Ports owns Southampton port and has just built the London Gateway port. Investment is going both ways, including to the northern powerhouse, and my aim is to get more investment into the southern powerhouse and particularly Portsmouth. British people are leading at Masdar City, the first clean energy city.

We met British people working closely with counter-terrorism initiatives such as Hedayah and Sawab. Those organisations are identifying what is drawing our young people to Daesh and other terrorist organisations that are exploiting. We were allowed to challenge Ministers on that and I was pleased to hear UAE Ministers appreciating that work is being done in this area and will continue. We heard about a domestic abuse charity set up by a female MP and work being done elsewhere. We met Tristan Forster, who runs FSI Worldwide to ensure that workers are not exploited. We were allowed to challenge Ministers on these points, and they are well aware of our views.

Only by continuing this close relationship can we challenge our friends and not avoid the difficult questions. Our ambassador, Philip Parham, is working hard to build the relationship, and I hope we continue to build on a friendship that has been part of our joint history for many years.

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the family links that she has and, indeed, the wider expatriate community throughout the middle east region has are the reason why Britain can play such a key role in the future of that region?

Mrs Drummond: Absolutely. There are 120,000 British people living in the UAE, compared with just 50,000 Americans. We are the most important country to the UAE, and that must be continued.

Some Emiratis were educated at the same school as me, the English Speaking School in Dubai, and many were taught by my headmistress, Miss Dorothy Miles, who spent all of her working life teaching generations of Arab and foreign children in Dubai and Sharjah.

It is the case that 70% of university graduates are women, and women are encouraged to build a career and to continue it even when they have children. The Speaker of the UAE Parliament is a woman. Women sit side by side with men in their chamber; there is no segregation. Women are quickly moving to the top of the professions there.

Some people are concerned about human rights, and we looked into that when we were in the UAE. I am a believer that it is better to work closely with countries that are developing than to ignore them, and I was pleased to hear UAE Ministers appreciating that work is being done in this area and will continue. We heard about a domestic abuse charity set up by a female MP and work being done elsewhere. We met Tristan Forster, who runs FSI Worldwide to ensure that workers are not exploited. We were allowed to challenge Ministers on these points, and they are well aware of our views.

Only by continuing this close relationship can we challenge our friends and not avoid the difficult questions. Our ambassador, Philip Parham, is working hard to build the relationship, and I hope we continue to build on a friendship that has been part of our joint history for many years.

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on securing this timely debate. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I should also state that my wife works in the Cabinet Office and has a significant interest in the Gulf region.

The Government’s strategic approach to our country’s engagement in the Gulf is a rare spark of hope in that troubled region. Because of the significant potential gain that that fresh approach can give Britain, I strongly believe that we would do well to replicate it in the wider middle east and elsewhere. I do not want to overstate the region’s prospects. It faces vast challenges. The continuing low oil price is cutting Gulf economies off at the knees. In response, those countries with a relatively recent history of significant state subsidisation of their economies, such as Kuwait, are going through the very difficult process of readjusting the scale of state intervention. In doing so, their nascent democracies are facing a real test. The Gulf states also face a resurgent Russia, an Iranian regime high on the after-effects of its nuclear deal, Islamist extremism nibbling at the borders, and the threat of internal instability because the current social contract between rulers and ruled cannot be sustained. The population is mushrooming, and unemployment, human rights abuses and sectarian strife fuel the discomfort. Without doubt, vast reform—economic, social, religious and governmental—is urgently required.

I do not want to overstate our role, either. Our relationship used to be of a great power protecting small local powers. We are the region’s oldest and staunchest ally, marking 200 years of relations with Bahrain this year. Today, the relationship has changed.
It is one of partnership. Our long-standing and deep relationship with Kuwait has become one of deep, mutual benefit—investment and knowledge flowing in both directions. Qatar’s fast emergence in the region, along with its strong desire to use its new-found wealth to play a significant and constructive part in the region and the wider world, should be welcomed by us.

Clearly, Britain’s partnerships have become critical to our mutual interests in the wider region. None is more vital than finding the settlements to sustain stability, for if we leave a less stable middle east to our children, we will have failed them—and if we are to leave a stable world to our children, we depend on the Gulf states. If we support our allies through gradual transformation, they can change peacefully; if we do not, they will not. If we withdraw, we must brace ourselves for the opposite, and we cannot kid ourselves any more that we would not feel the impact at home; we would suffer, too. The Gulf states of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, the UAE and Qatar are an island of stability in a deeply unstable region. We have to keep them that way.

Mrs Drummond: I do not know whether my hon. Friend has seen the Arab youth survey by ASDA’s Burson-Marsteller, which talked to 3,500 young Arabs and showed that the UAE is the country that they would most like to emulate in their own countries.

Dr Lee: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. More broadly than the UAE, across the whole region, the youth of the region is part of its challenge, but also part of the opportunity for the future.

I welcome the Government’s broad, deep and integrated approach—addressing what underpins long-term security, such as education, economic resilience and good governance, as well as increasing co-operation to address immediate threats from terrorism, organised crime and the like.

I want to mention three specific issues. First, tensions with Iran are at an ever increasing risk of boiling over following the nuclear deal. If in the long term the west is to get rid of the responsibility of helping to keep the peace in the Gulf—a responsibility that it would have little appetite to fulfil if tested—we must help the region to develop its own infrastructure for resolving such tensions.

Secondly, the Gulf states face extraordinary demographic challenges from growing youth populations at the same time as economic means are being slashed. We must gear our engagement to support economic diversification and entrepreneurship to grow and then sustain jobs for young people, and to engage in new ways via digital and social media. There are myriad opportunities in cyber, in space and at the forefront of science, technology and innovation that could enable them to leapfrog stages of development. If they are successful at doing that, we will all benefit.

The third issue is resource resilience and, in particular, access to water in a region that already faces the biggest water deficits in the world and increasing demand. The Gulf states’ existence is already a triumph of vision and wealth over the laws of nature. Human survival in that climate is a tribute to the miracles of air conditioning and desalination.

Finally, I am convinced—

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): Order. We will move on to the winding-up speeches.

10.29 am

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under the chairmanship of a fellow member of the Procedure Committee, Mr Nuttall. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on securing the debate. Her speech was thoughtful and considered, setting the context for the debate. I understand the frustrations of Members who have not been able to speak for as long as they might have wanted to. Scottish National party Members have experienced that on a number of occasions since arriving in Westminster. I will try to keep my remarks reasonably brief so the Minister has time to respond to the various serious points that have been raised by all parties.

The hon. Member for Bristol North West made a number of cultural references, so I will chuck in one or two of my own. I recommend a book called “The Years of Rice and Salt” by Kim Stanley Robinson, which presents an alternative history of the world, imagining that the population of Europe is wiped out by the black death. As a result, the entire cultural, social and economic enlightenment comes from the east and from the Islamic world. The various reflections that the hon. Lady made about the role of Islam reminded me very much of that book and of the counter-history it suggests. Without giving anything away, the ultimate conclusion of the book is that some things change and some things stay the same.

While listening to some of the speeches, I was reminded of the television satirist Mrs Merton, who famously asked Debbie McGee, regarding her husband, “What first attracted you to the millionaire Paul Daniels?” An element of that attitude is, perhaps, reflected in some relationships with small, oil-rich countries that have huge energy potential and industrious, increasingly well-educated populations. In Scotland, we were told that such a model would lead to nothing but doom and gloom but, evidently, it seems quite acceptable for the countries of the Gulf.

Much has been made of personal experience. I will not pretend to have much in the way of first-hand experience of the countries being discussed, other than transiting Dubai airport, incidentally in an Airbus A380. I looked out of the window and was struck by those magnificent buildings rising out of the desert in the distance, but the sight made me ask at what cost many of those buildings were constructed. What was the human cost and what were the labour conditions when such cities rose from the desert? What is the ongoing cost to the environment and the climate of using carbon and energy-intensive methods to build a western model of capitalism in that part of the world?

I will reflect briefly on economic relations, defence and human rights situations, and echo some questions that have been raised with the UK Government. Although I have not personally travelled to the region, a delegation from the SNP visited Iran at around Christmas time. Perhaps the agreement that has been reached with Iran presents something of a model of stability and transition. The point about stability has been well made and it is a perfectly acceptable point, but perhaps something can be learned about transition and opening up economic
opportunities. Bilateral trade with the region is into the billions. We have spoken about Dubai as a transport hub and tourist destination. My city—Glasgow—benefits from direct flights to Dubai.

I have not heard mention of the 2022 World cup in Qatar, so I will touch on that. I mentioned labour rights and building rights. It would be interesting to hear what continued dialogue the Government have with FIFA and with the Government in Qatar about the treatment of migrant workers and the continued reports of deaths and injuries on construction sites. The Government are committed to the sustainable development goals of promoting equality and leaving no one behind in the world. How do those goals apply to the Government’s relations with the Gulf states?

The issue of migration and security, including the ability of people to travel, was touched on. The Government have introduced visa waivers across the region, most recently in Kuwait. That contrasts quite interestingly with the crackdown in other areas—for example, the difficulty that people in sub-Saharan Africa face in obtaining visas for the United Kingdom. We have heard about defence contracts and the base in Bahrain. All I would say is that the arms industry is a choice. It is not inevitable. If we are to deal in arms and military contracts, we must ensure that they are not being abused.

Sir Gerald Howarth: I represent the headquarters of BAE Systems, which, for half a century, has had a very important relationship with Saudi Arabia. Does the SNP not understand that these Gulf states are allies of the UK, and that they face a threat, to which my hon. Friends have all referred? Does the hon. Gentleman not think that the UK should help our allies in the Gulf to defend themselves against that threat with British equipment, much of which is made in Scotland?

Patrick Grady: I am not entirely sure that now is the best time to talk about defence contracts coming to Scotland, given the concerns being expressed about the shipyards on the Clyde. The reality is that, if British weapons are being exported and traded, there is a responsibility under the international instruments to ensure that they are being used appropriately.

Seema Kennedy: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Patrick Grady: I will not give way because the shadow Minister and the Minister still have to respond. The Minister needs to respond to points that have been raised several times about the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the conflict in Yemen. It may be that UK-built planes with pilots trained by instructors from the UK are dropping bombs that are made in the UK. That may be co-ordinated by the Saudis in the presence of UK military advisers. If that does not add up to some kind of UK complicity in the conflict and the alleged war crimes, I wonder what does.

Sir Alan Duncan: No, it does not.

Patrick Grady: Well, those are the points that need to be answered and investigated. Those are serious complaints. I met with people from Yemen who showed me pictures of the destruction that has been caused there. They allege that that has been caused by weapons manufactured in the UK. Those allegations need to be investigated.

There is a contradiction in UK policy. The Home Office now accepts that there is a risk of violence against civilians and says that deportations back to Yemen could be a breach of human rights. Yet the Foreign and Commonwealth Office continues to deny that there have been war crimes and says that Saudi Arabia is acting within humanitarian law. Which is the UK Government’s position? They need to have a joined-up approach, and that speaks to the wider questions in the region. If we want to promote stability and find an alternative to Daesh, we must find a way of leading by example. We have that opportunity in this debate. Those are the questions that we would like answered.

I echo an awful lot of what the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) said. We must not allow ourselves to be blinded by wealth glimmering off the desert sun. Economic gain should not be at any cost. The Scottish First Minister said, in China, that human rights and economic development should be two sides of the same coin, and that promoting equality and human rights is the best way to promote and empower populations, and to grow economies. We should use the stable and strong relations in these Gulf states to encourage democracy and promote human rights.

10.37 am

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on securing the debate. She gave a thoughtful speech and was, at times, very witty when she referred to “Monty Python’s Life of Brian” and “Jesus Christ Superstar”. She mentioned the internal challenges faced by Islam and discussed how that reflects on the region and on the wider world.

I am pleased that we are having a debate on the broader thematic issues in British foreign policy and our wider strategy in the region. As we have heard, Britain has a long and close relationship with the Gulf. As many hon. Members have said, that is probably more important now than it has ever been before. The Gulf states are vital partners of the UK in trade and economic co-operation, defence and security, and cultural ties. It has been interesting to hear about the great deal of experience and knowledge of the region that hon. Members have brought to the debate.

On the economic relationship that we enjoy, the Gulf remains a key source of foreign direct investment into the UK and a market for our own exports. We heard about Airbus in particular. We only need to look at the London skyline to see Gulf investment in the UK, as the tallest building in Europe is the Qatari-funded Shard at London bridge. We should also recognise that one of the key benefits that the UK offers to the Gulf states is access to EU markets, and we would be vulnerable to losing much of that investment to other EU states if we were to leave the EU.

We have also heard today about the importance of defence co-operation. Several Gulf states are partners of the UK in the fight against Daesh. Many Gulf states send troops to train at Sandhurst, and the Gulf is one of the largest markets for UK defence exports. I am particularly
pleased to see British support for the development of the port in Oman, which will help Oman’s economy and will provide a vital berthing point for our new Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers. Intelligence sharing supports our fight against terrorism at home and abroad, and that co-operation is underpinned by strong governmental relationships. The Gulf states are not just long-standing allies of the UK; we have formal relationships with states such as Oman, Qatar and Kuwait that facilitate regular dialogue and co-operation.

Those economic and governmental ties, built on years of co-operation, are what provide the strength of our current relationship with the Gulf states, but it is frustrating that the Government are reluctant to use the strength of those relationships to push for vital reforms. When it comes to human rights, democracy and environmental protections, we should expect the highest standards from our friends and allies, yet the Government appear reluctant to prioritise any of those issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) spoke eloquently about human rights and democratic reforms. We would like a greater pace of reform in all the Gulf states, but two countries are of particular note.

First, not only is the pace of democratic reform in Saudi Arabia very slow but there are widespread and severe human rights abuses, with high levels of corporal punishment, including the death penalty, and very limited freedom of expression, as illustrated by the case of Raif Badawi. There are also high levels of torture, and the position of women is still abysmal, yet the current British Government have been extraordinarily reluctant to criticise the Saudi Government. I have mentioned the benefit to the UK economy of arms sales, which must come with tight controls. There are serious and sustained concerns that Saudi-led action in Yemen has included possible war crimes and, therefore, has breached the conditions of the current arms export licences.

Seema Kennedy: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Diana Johnson: I will continue, because I want to make these points. Again, the Government have been slow to engage with those allegations. First, they seemed to back an independent inquiry, and then they supported the Saudis’ own investigation, but now they are calling for the inquiry to be speeded up. The Opposition remain convinced that the Saudi investigation will not be sufficiently independent or transparent, and we think it is right to halt arms sales to Saudi Arabia while the investigations are conducted.

The second state is Bahrain. Although the pace of reforms in Bahrain is greater than in Saudi Arabia, there are still serious concerns about the position of opposition and civil society groups, the detention of political prisoners and the use of torture in the justice system. The reforms introduced by the Bahraini Government, although highly welcome, have not been fully implemented, and both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have raised concerns about the situation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith said, the UK Government have been working with the Bahraini Government on those reforms, so we should be prepared to recognise where the reforms have not been fully implemented and to publicly push the Bahrainis to go further.

Margaret Ferrier: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Diana Johnson: I will continue. The two countries that I have highlighted shine light on the reluctance among Foreign Office Ministers to raise human rights issues in the region, which, as has already been said, was highlighted by the recent reports of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Sir Alan Duncan: May I say something about Yemen?

Diana Johnson: I will continue. In the recent UK-Kuwait joint steering group, for example, human rights, women’s rights, democratic reforms, support for the humanitarian crisis in the middle east and labour rights for migrant workers were not discussed, nor was trafficking. The US State Department singled out Kuwait as having one of the worst records on human trafficking. I know the UK Government take that issue seriously, so I am surprised that it was not raised with the Kuwaiti authorities.

The situation is equally problematic in Qatar, where exploitation and trafficking remain commonplace, including on the World cup construction sites, as exposed by the recent Trades Union Congress investigation. A similar story could be told on environmental issues. The British Government could do more to make that clear and to push the Gulf states to meet their international obligations on CO₂ emissions.

I want the Minister to have ample opportunity to respond to all the points raised in today’s debate, so I will conclude by saying that we need from the Government a broad strategy for the region that recognises the strength of our current relationships and looks to utilise those relationships to support British aims in the region, including more democratic and open societies.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am grateful for your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. Before I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on a formidable speech and on securing this debate, as others have done. I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) for a measured and appropriately balanced speech that pressed the Government while illustrating the many areas where there are synergies between what the Government and the official Opposition believe. The Gulf is an important part of the world for us, and we are grateful for the depth of knowledge that she has illustrated today, which underlines why we need to understand the region before we can comment on it.

That takes me nicely to my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Bristol North West, who articulated the reasons why it is important not only that we debate such matters here, but that Britain continues this vital relationship. She has just come back from a series of visits, and speeches from both sides of the Chamber have reflected the importance of our engaging with and understanding the region. I encourage all hon. Members to do what they can to visit the region as frequently as possible, because that helps to dispel myths and allows us to have the frank conversations that we need in order to advance democracy, human rights and the rule of law—all the things that matter so much.
Margaret Ferrier: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will make some progress first and then, time permitting, I will be delighted to give way. There are a lot of issues to cover, but I will give way if there is time.

I welcome the breadth of knowledge that has been displayed in this debate, and I ask for that to continue. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West spelled out some of the challenges with which the middle east, with its diversity, is having to contend in a modern setting. We have obviously had the Arab spring and its aftermath, and the drop in oil prices is having an enormous effect on all countries in the region. The growth of extremism is hugely challenging in that neck of the woods, and then there is the advance of the internet in a culturally conservative part of the world that is suddenly having to deal with a very liberal way of sharing information and making comment. That has to be mapped out with a growing youth population, which is looking over its shoulder and saying, “We want a very different set of views, values and outlook on life from our parents or the generation before them.”

The Gulf is going through immense challenges, which provides opportunities, but it also means that the Gulf’s friendships outside the region are all the more important. Without mentioning any names, there are other parts of the world that have disengaged somewhat from the middle east, and it is therefore all the more important for us to remember our strong bonds, which are not just about today or about the visits. As has been said, the bonds go back to historical agreements over 200 years that established maritime, trade and diplomatic relationships and allowed us to develop the enormously strong bonds and bilateral ties that are evident today.

The Gulf’s stability is our stability, and we must recognise that the Gulf states have been the custodians of much of the world’s oil and gas supplies in recent decades, helping the world to keep the lights on. The region’s security is tied to our security, but the region’s prosperity is also our prosperity. That was reflected in the last security and defence review, and it has been illustrated today by a number of hon. Members who referred to our commitments from a military perspective right across the Gulf.

However, we also must recognise that it is not just on security and hydrocarbons that we have established strong relationships; our relationships are now diversifying. I can share with the House that we now have six-monthly bilateral working groups with every single Gulf nation—I will go with a team to one of the countries or they will come here. The last one was with Oman, and we go through the entire relationship, from security, defence and hydrocarbons—those norms that we understand—to, now, education: how the British Council can do more work on getting English taught in schools or developing the curriculum. We also discuss how we can help work with police reforms, ombudsmen, processes to allow women’s rights to be established, and so forth.

Many of these things are happening behind the scenes, because that is the way those countries prefer to do business, and we have success; we are able to move forward, which is very positive. I stress to the House that just because people do not see the headlines or hear us shouting out about things, that does not mean they do not happen. That is very important to remember.

Margaret Ferrier: On that point, there has been much talk today about visiting the region, so will the Foreign Office guarantee my safety if I decide to go and visit Saudi Arabia?

Mr Ellwood: I am not sure how helpful that comment is. Anybody travelling to the region needs to read the travel advice. I encourage the hon. Lady to go to Saudi Arabia, because—as others have found—she will come back having learned something. She will discover, especially if it is a visit endorsed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, that she will have access to many of the programmes that are taking place in what is very much a culturally conservative society.

There is a desire in this House for immediate, 21st-century change—to slide across our values, our standards, our processes and our democratic systems all in one. That is not going to happen quickly, in the same way that it did not happen quickly in this country, from giving women the vote to getting rid of slavery. The other day, I went back to my old stomping ground of the London Stock Exchange, where I worked—I made a visit there for a listing that was taking place with Morocco. Women were not allowed on the trading floor in the UK until the 1970s. Our first female ambassador was not appointed until 1976. These things take time.

Of course, in the 21st century we expect countries to take advantage of best practice and of the support and programmes that are available, so that they do not have to take the 800 years that we have taken since Magna Carta to develop the standards that we enjoy today.

Lady Hermon: Will the Minister take this opportunity to put on record the gratitude that is felt by a number of countries in the Gulf that have benefited from former members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary—very distinguished members of the RUC, from Northern Ireland—who have gone out to Gulf states and improved their human rights records in policing?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady makes a valid point. That is a great example of countries using that experience of dealing with diverse groups and communities that have been broken in the past and that need to heal and move forward. That experience and knowledge can be taken to countries in the Gulf, so that it can be shared. I pay huge tribute to the teams who have gone from Northern Ireland to the Gulf. In fact, it is not only in the Gulf where they are doing such work; they are doing it even further afield. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for making that point and putting it on the record.

Sir Gerald Howarth: My hon. Friend the Minister was talking about the role of women. Does he agree that the Bahrainis themselves have shown remarkable foresight, as their previous ambassador here was not only female but a Christian? Does that example not illustrate the kind of diversity that we see in Bahrain, which is one of our closest allies and best friends?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. Change is happening, but of course we want to increase that change, so we are doing our best to advance it and expedite it. On the Shura council in Saudi Arabia, there were no women before; now there are women on it. In
The Gulf

The Gulf states have significant regional influence that is rooted in our shared history, and our future security and, indeed, prosperity are closely linked with theirs. Mature relationships with our Gulf partners are deeply rooted in our shared history, and our future security and, indeed, prosperity are closely linked with theirs. The Gulf states have significant regional influence that they can bring to bear on issues that affect our national security, such as regional conflicts and violent extremism, so it is in our national interest to deepen co-operation with them, building on our existing relationships with them to our mutual benefit.

10.59 am

Charlotte Leslie: I want to pay tribute to the Minister, who in many ways—through the style of his delivery and his experience—sums up what for me has been the thing to take away from this debate, which is the enormous value of experience and the nuance that it gives to consideration of this topic, versus the arrogance of ignorance. There are practical benefits of understanding the region—of actually being practical—versus the luxury, and it is a luxury, of impotent moralising from a far-off position.

I am so sorry that we did not get to hear about the enormous wealth of nuanced experience of so many hon. Members, which could actually serve to change things that we all want to change in the region—because we care about the people—and I hope that in time to come that experience and those practical benefits will trump the arrogance of ignorance.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Mr Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered health services in West Cumbria.

I thank you, Mr Nuttall, for chairing this debate, which is on the particularly important subject of health services in west Cumbria and the ongoing work of the success regime process in my part of the world. I am pleased to see the Minister in his place. He responded to my debate concerning these matters in December last year, and he is well aware of the numerous difficult issues that I will raise with him today. He will know that any criticisms I make are not personal or even necessarily politically partisan. In all the years I have fought for this argument and this cause, I have represented thousands of constituents who do not vote for me or my party. I always have and always will place my constituency interests above any superficial party political interests.

Most of all, I seek solutions in this debate for the ongoing problems facing the north, east and west Cumbrian health economy. The problems have persisted for too long. They have worsened and can no longer be allowed to defy resolution. The Minister has responded positively to my questions and requests in the past—I am exceptionally grateful for that—and I hope he can do so again today.

I will start by outlining the issues facing my constituents in accessing health services in west Cumbria. The problems facing the North Cumbria University Hospitals NHS Trust are well known. There is intense pressure on overworked and under-resourced staff. I am grateful for the work undertaken by The Cumberland News and the News and Star, particularly that of the journalists Emily Parsons and Pamela McGowan, in helping to illustrate the scale of the problems within the trust. I will return to those later.

In such a rural county with such dispersed areas of urban population, the pressures on ambulance services are enormous. There is unprecedented pressure on primary care and GP services as a result of doctor shortages and truly catastrophic cuts to adult social services as a result of the Government’s choice to cut Cumbria County Council’s budget. A new threat in the guise of the potential closure of beds in the area’s community hospitals has emerged to widespread anger and condemnation from every community that relies upon them.

Added to those problems are the problems—caused exclusively by Government, I fear—facing the success regime. In particular, I want to address the success regime and, despite the initial optimism, the manifest problems and difficulties the process has been presented with. Critically, I will talk about the consequences of the success regime’s failure, how we can avoid them and how we can solve the problems facing our health economy, which is undoubtedly the most challenged in Britain. I will also talk about the recent floods, the effects of which are still being keenly felt throughout the county. They have magnified the issues at the heart of the debate over health services in the area.

Finally, I will pose as many of the questions sent to me as I can before outlining the health needs of my community and those of neighbouring communities—those needs, after all, are what it comes down to. The key issue for decision makers, Government and Ministers is: what do the people of west Cumbria need from their health services and how can that be delivered? That is a very different question from, “What are the Government prepared to provide?” Make no mistake, at the heart of the issue is the question: is the national health service worthy of the name? When we answer those questions, we should have the humility and wisdom to recognise that the consequences of the decisions we take now will outlast the lifespan of this Government. They will certainly outlast my and the Minister’s political careers. That is the gravity, the reality and the privilege of the situation we find ourselves in.

The simple answer is that the people of west Cumbria need better access to health services, particularly the hospital services provided by the West Cumberland Hospital in Whitehaven. It serves a vast rural area with many tightly compacted urban communities, with all the attendant challenges that has. In that context, access can be defined in a number of ways. It means the actual services provided locally, ensuring that those services are staffed appropriately so that they are of a high quality, and empowering the community so that it is listened to when decisions about its services are taken. It also means proper planning for the significant population expansion forecast for the area. In west Cumbria, each area is immensely challenging and we must address that. It is what the success regime was meant to address.

At this point, I have to thank the hundreds of patients, medical professionals past and present and members of the public who responded to my request for questions or evidence relating to the success regime process and the condition of the local health service in general. Time limits mean that I will not be able to put every question to the Minister today, but those I cannot ask I will either table as parliamentary questions or I will write to the Secretary of State for Health expressing the concerns. I am particularly grateful to the Royal College of Nursing, the Joint League of Friends of Community Hospitals, West Cumbrians’ Voice for Health Care—it has undertaken phenomenal work—and healthcare campaigners in Millom, Keswick and right across Allerdale, Carlisle and Penrith and the Border. I hope the Minister will ensure that the Secretary of State replies honestly and at length.

The Minister will be well aware that in July 2013, Sir Bruce Keogh published his review into mortality rates at a number of hospital trusts around the country. North Cumbria University Hospitals NHS Trust was one of them. Along with 10 other trusts, it was placed in special measures. The trust had higher than average mortality rates and action to remedy that was obviously welcome and necessary. At the time, Ministers were unable to provide basic information about what special measures actually meant for the trust, but it was patently clear that the major reason for care failings at the trust was—it remains the case—a chronic staff shortage.

It is only right that I again take this opportunity to thank, on a personal level as a parent and on behalf of my constituents, the amazing staff who work tirelessly in trying conditions to provide high-quality care. Many work unpaid overtime because they care about their patients, their work and, by extension, the service they provide to my community. I and my constituents know that they work in extraordinary circumstances beyond their control, and we are so grateful for their work. I doubt that any community in the country prizes its medical professionals so highly.
The truth is that every part of the health economy in west, east and north Cumbria simply needs more staff in primary care, secondary care, acute care and across our preventive services. Government must intervene to ensure that the problem is resolved, assisting with local initiatives wherever possible. That request has fallen on deaf ears for too long. The most recent report on the North Cumbria University Hospitals NHS Trust by the Care Quality Commission, which was published in September 2015, illustrated the scale of the challenge. It stated:

“The recruitment of nursing staff also remained an on-going challenge. At the time of our inspection nurse staffing levels, although improved, were still of concern and there was a heavy reliance on staff working extra shifts and on bank and agency staff to maintain staffing levels. There were times when the wards were not appropriately staffed to meet the needs of patients.”

I am sure the Minister would agree that that simply is not acceptable. In 2013-14, the trust spent £16 million on agency staff. That is clearly a false economy. Agency staff are a short-term expensive solution to a long-term problem.

Stable, long-term recruitment is key to turning around the finances of the local health economy and the hospital trust in particular. If my local trust has to pay over the odds to secure services taken for granted in other parts of the country, it should be able to do that and be funded appropriately by the Department of Health. That must be accepted by the success regime and by Government. Sadly, that is not currently the case. Sadly, it is not a conflation of the issues to point out that the Secretary of State’s antagonistic and insulting behaviour towards junior doctors is severely worsening the recruitment problem in challenged health economies such as that in Cumbria.

In my constituency, I have been working with the trust and the University of Central Lancashire to bring a medical school to west Cumbria so that we can “grow our own medics”. It would be a long-term sustainable solution to one of the key problems we face. I am delighted to say that the new West Cumberland medical education campus now exists at the Westlakes science park, immediately adjacent to the new West Cumberland hospital in my constituency. So far that has succeeded without the support or involvement of Government, but I hope that the Government will be able to support the development, not just in spirit as I know the Minister does, but with practical assistance, including money.

In addition to growing our own medics in west Cumbria for the benefit of the entire Cumbrian health economy, we are providing the basis for policy solutions by becoming a rural health policy laboratory. The campus can and should become a crucible of innovation, providing solutions to the problems facing rural areas through the provision of high-quality, accessible, universal health services. The Minister has expressed support for that in the past, but the Government should now support it financially and in terms of policy. Will he request that Health Education England works with the University of Central Lancashire and the North Cumbria University Hospitals NHS Trust as a matter of urgency so that innovative models of healthcare training, such as earn-while-you-learn models, can be rolled out, not only in Cumbria but in other challenged health economies?

I hope that the Government will look again at nursing bursaries. The Chancellor’s decision to scrap those will only make it harder for us to train and recruit the medical staff that we need. The market will not deliver the workforce that the national health service requires; it will deliver only inefficiency and inequality. We need proper workforce planning right across the national health service.

On the subject of the local health workforce, will the Minister commit to looking into the morale issues affecting health professionals in the area covered by the success regime and undertake action to improve this?

In December, I told the Minister that sooner or later our luck would run out and that patients would pay the price. Tragically, as documented in the *News and Star* and *The Cumberland News* recently, the signs are that that is already happening. It was reported yesterday that in March a patient was transferred from the West Cumberland Hospital in Whitehaven to the Cumberland Infirmary in Carlisle, but died—according to the medics who have come forward—because specialist staff were not alerted to the patient’s arrival in Carlisle. The patient subsequently had a cardiac arrest and died. If that is true, it is not only a direct result and a damning indictment of policy, but the inevitable consequence of an overburdened, underfunded and understaffed system. I cannot imagine the despair that the family of the deceased must feel, and I cannot describe how angry I am that, in all likelihood, a constituent of mine has died as a result of being transferred from the West Cumberland Hospital to the Cumberland Infirmary.

The community has repeatedly warned of such an event. It has not been listened to and so I ask the Minister to commit as a matter of urgency to making a statement in the House about this and other so-called never events that occur across the North Cumbria University Hospitals NHS Trust. We need to solve these problems, and we need to determine accountability for them, too. I know that the medics and the new chief executive, Stephen Eames, are determined to get this right.

At the beginning of 2015, I wrote to the NHS chief executive, Simon Stevens, and asked him to visit Cumbria to see for himself the geographical challenges; to speak to patients and staff; and to work with me to develop a comprehensive recovery plan for the Cumbrian health economy. Nowhere in the country is quite like Cumbria. The health inequalities, the demographic differences, the challenging geography and the contrast between the affluent and those who are less well-off all present unique challenges with regard to providing services—right across the board, not just in the health service.

The national health service should ensure equality of standards and accessibility of services, but how that is delivered must be flexible enough to accommodate unique local circumstances such as those in Cumbria. The success regime is the response to my request for a comprehensive recovery plan. That new regime was intended to develop a locally tailored solution to the problems that we face. I was a shadow Health Minister at the time I made the request. Sadly, it is unusual for me to ask my colleagues in the Department that they cover to work together on an issue of joint concern for the greater good.

In December, I expressed my concerns about the then management team at the hospitals trust. I pointed out how it had attempted to defy the NHS chief executive and sabotage the work of the success regime. The appointment of Stephen Eames and his team has changed...
all that to date, but the public are still understandably worried about the prospect of key services being removed from the West Cumberland Hospital.

I was present at a meeting with Simon Stevens and the success regime when the trust management was told categorically that the continued “asset-stripping” — that was the precise phrase — of services from the West Cumberland Hospital should not continue. It was an uncomfortable meeting, but a welcome one in which the primacy of the success regime in determining what services would be provided was where was asserted.

In December, I told the Minister that unless the previous trust management committed fully to the success regime process, it should have no part to play in the future of healthcare service design in west, north and east Cumbria. Information now coming from many people from within the success regime process is that the process is not working and that the reason for that is Government intransigence, a refusal to listen to the experts on the ground and a refusal to grant the additional resources that the process requires to succeed.

In the rest of the country, the Government and the NHS would be hard pushed to find more committed, willing, well-informed and passionate communities when it comes to health services than the communities of west, north and east Cumbria. We want the success regime to work and the people within the success regime want it to work, but right now the Government are stopping it working. I am told, from within the process, that the success regime and the people in it know what they need to do to put the health economy right, but that, as soon as ideas are put forward, they are knocked down.

I have been asked to ask the Minister whether the Government recognise that a premium is required to continue to enable the people of west Cumbria to access certain acute services at the West Cumberland Hospital. Do the Government recognise that centralising services in Carlisle is about service cost, not service quality, and that this will lead to worse outcomes for patients? Again, I am told from within the success regime that the exercise is now becoming one that is not as has been advertised. Rather than a process of investigation and improvement, it has become a cost-management tool and the people within the process do not want it to be that way, yet the Government insist that cuts, not quality, are king. I have been asked, again from within the success regime, what happened to the Prime Minister’s promise of a bare-knuckle fight for district general hospitals and maternity services, because it either has not materialised or was a knowing deception.

There are more questions, all of which I will forward to the Secretary of State, but the most incredible intervention in the work of the success regime was recently made by the Cumbria Partnership NHS Foundation Trust. In an open letter to the success regime, the chairman of the trust have given notice of their intention not to approve the work of the success regime, accusing its emerging options proposals of lacking logic, transparency, financial evidence and meaningful detail. The letter states:

“Our problem is that on every significant issue, the Success Regime appears to us to be shrouded in impenetrable fog.”

The letter adds that the success regime’s vision is “woefully lacking in sensitivity to the health-related implications of geography and demography in Cumbria.”

Nowhere can this be seen more than in the unjustifiable proposals to remove beds from community hospitals. They deserve better in Millom, Keswick, Maryport, Workington, Brampton and Alston. This demonstrates precisely what we risk destroying here: a process that the people, public and medical professionals of Cumbria supported with optimism at the outset, but that now risks collapse and failure because the Government have changed the remit of the success regime as its work has progressed.

The point underpinning all of this is relatively simple: access to a full and comprehensive range of acute hospital services for the people of west Cumbria is non-negotiable, and the success regime requires freedom from Government interference to complete its work. The work requires additional funding. If the success regime is to succeed, it has to be funded to succeed. Let us not pretend that that is not the case.

The recent flooding in the county has shown that if services were transferred from the West Cumberland Hospital, in times of emergency patients simply would not be able to access them as they would not be able to get to the Cumberland Infirmary. Again, that is not acceptable. In times of emergency, the people of west Cumbria need to be able to access their services, and that can be assured only by retaining the services in their local hospital — the West Cumberland Hospital — a fantastic new facility that the Minister knows I have campaigned for for more than 10 years, and which should now become a model for how we provide care in non-metropolitan communities in the 21st century.

I have a specific request for the Minister. Will he move to unblock the funding for phase 2 of the West Cumberland Hospital new build programme? I have been told that the money has been allocated but is not accessible. I ask that this is done as soon as possible so as to provide confidence and help build trust. Will the Minister tell my constituents that this will be done soon as a central part of the success regime process, and will he confirm that this project is not included among those deferred capital spending programmes identified in the Health Service Journal this week? There can be no agreement of any kind without this money being unlocked.

West Cumbria is home to one of the most nationally and strategically important sites in the shape of Sellafield. Over the coming years, with new nuclear reactors at Moorside, thousands of jobs will be created, and my constituency will become one of the fastest growing regional economies in the country. This is due to the plan I developed in 2005: the plan that my community has worked towards ever since. As a result, the local population will grow significantly and quickly.

The people who live in west Cumbria now need better access to the health services they rely on, but it is simply mind-boggling that when a local population is growing, anyone should believe it is sensible to move services 40 miles along a road in need of serious upgrading and subject to frequent closure.

The local NHS must take into account strategic infrastructure and the local population of host communities when planning services. The Minister has been unequivocal about this in the past, and I thank him again for that. Will he ensure that the local population growth and the
national obligation owed to my community as a result of its strategic importance is addressed prominently and clearly as part of the work of the success regime!

The fundamental principles in this debate are straightforward. Moving services 40 miles away from the West Cumberland Hospital is the antithesis of the principles that underpin a truly national health service. I said in December that unless the patients and taxpayers of my community can access the same level of healthcare routinely provided by the NHS in other communities, the NHS exists in name only. Forty miles is not a reasonable distance to ask people in need of medical care to travel, particularly when that 40 miles is served by such inadequate infrastructure. Mothers giving birth do not want to sit in an ambulance on the A595 hoping that they do not get stuck behind a tractor or encounter a road traffic accident.

A fully operational A&E department, supported by associated departments, consultant-led maternity services and paediatric services, must remain at West Cumberland hospital. If we need to adopt a flexible approach to achieve that, that is what we must do. Fully functioning community hospitals with the beds that they have provide an invaluable service in the communities of west, north and east Cumbria. Those services should be built upon, expanded and improved in the face of growing demand, not cut. The Government must allow the success regime the freedom and finances to make that happen.

The Government and local authority partners in Cumbria recently attempted to reach an agreement on a devolution deal. The deal was appalling, but local partners tried hard, on a cross-party basis, to make it work. Negotiations continued right up until the eve of the Budget, so keen was the Chancellor to include the deal in his Budget statement, but they collapsed because the Government refused to accommodate the wishes of local partners with regard to the NHS in Cumbria. Will the Minister tell me whether the Department was consulted, or whether the deal was driven purely by the Treasury?

I have today written to the Secretary of State to invite him to my constituency to listen to local people, hear their concerns and answer their questions. He will be accountable for this process, come hell or high water. To summarise, will the Minister commit to giving the success regime the freedom it needs and the west, east and north Cumbrian health economy the additional resources it requires? Will he commit to making a statement to the House on the recent never events in the local hospitals trust, how they happened and who is responsible? Will he commit to retaining existing acute services at the West Cumberland hospital? Will he commit to supporting the west Cumbria medical campus with both funding and assistance from Health Education England? Will he commit to releasing the funds for phase 2 of the West Cumberland hospital new build?

I want the success regime process to work and the Minister wants it to work, but it will do so only if the Government work with my community, not against it. There is no doubt in my mind that we can solve the problems, but the Government have to want to solve them and they have to let the process work. The choice is clear: together, we can produce something truly special, groundbreaking and innovative, or we can watch a hollowed-out, under-funded, fraudulent process break the notion of a truly national health service. The NHS is our country’s religion; what happens next in Cumbria will demonstrate whether the Government believe in it.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): It is very kind of you to oversee this debate, Mr Nuttall. I thank the hon. Member for Copeland (Mr Reed) for his kind words and I of course accept the fact that he speaks on behalf of all his constituents—he has a fine track record of doing so. It is good to see the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) by his side, and to see here present my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson), who has also taken a profound interest in this intractable and difficult matter. I do not have much time, so I will address the points that the hon. Member for Copeland raised in turn.

The hon. Gentleman said that the NHS is our national religion. One of his great forebears, the creator of the NHS, Nye Bevan, said that socialism is the religion of priorities. I know that the hon. Gentleman understands the nonconformist antecedents of the British Labour party, perhaps better than some of the party’s current leadership. He will also know that we need to get priorities right in Cumbria. That is something that neither we nor our predecessors in Government have achieved for many years.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman does not mind if I start by refuting his central contention that the success regime has been perverted in its course. That is absolutely not the case. The success regime has had no further instruction from its co-sponsors, NHS England and NHS Improvement, since its foundation. I have certainly made no intervention, other than to listen carefully to Sir Neil McKay when he came to see me a few weeks ago so that I could understand the challenges that he has in bringing the success regime to a conclusion.

I am as frustrated as the hon. Gentleman is about the time the success regime is taking to formulate a plan, and I expressed that frustration to Sir Neil. He is going through the proper consultation process, which in Cumbria above all places needs to be done properly, given the failure of previous consultations either to be done properly or to result in a conclusion. That is why I understand why he feels he needs to go through the process as rigorously as possible, but I do want to see a conclusion. We need to see a proper clinical resolution to the problems. It is not for me to say what that clinical resolution will be, so I cannot comment on the hon. Gentleman’s specific questions about service delivery at West Cumberland hospital and its relationship with Carlisle, or, for that matter—he did not mention this—with other partners in the north, be they the Northumbria NHS Foundation Trust or other possible partners for the trusts in Cumbria.

We will give Cumbria all the means to be able to achieve what it needs to achieve, whether they be financial or representative. I hope the hon. Gentleman will understand that the 3% funding increase for the clinical commissioning group in Cumbria this year alone shows our commitment to ensuring that Cumbria has the funds it requires to achieve the changes it needs to make. Nevertheless, those changes will not come just from more money; there will need to be reform, which is why I urge him to look at the success regime’s emerging thoughts on integrated care communities. Those thoughts had been brought together not by me, NHS England or NHS Improvement but—certainly—I could myself as a bureaucrat in that sense—but by local clinicians who understand the problems on the ground.

11.22 am

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I cannot comment on the devolution deal, which is a matter for the Treasury, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I will ensure that he has an answer from the correct person on the recent never events, of which I was informed. He should know that the Secretary of State keeps in his office a board of never events throughout the NHS. He takes a keen interest in them and in their reduction. I hope that I can ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets a proper answer to those questions.

I have previously endorsed the moves by the University of Central Lancashire that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, and I will of course ask Health Education England to engage with that process as fully as possible. I disagree with him about the impact of nurse bursaries. It is exactly by reforming health education funding that we can release 10,000 additional places in nurse training school. Those places will mean that we can staff areas of the country that have been difficult to staff in the past. We cannot provide such massive expansion by the traditional means, and nor could the Labour party have promised to do so, because the costs involved are so considerable. It is by that reform that we will achieve the ends he wants to see. I want to be outlining more items of medical education reform in the next few months, and I hope that they will be to the advantage of places such as the University of Central Lancashire. In the meantime, I shall ensure that Health Education England takes a keen interest in that work—I know that it already is.

On the second phase of funding for the West Cumberland hospital A&E department, it is incumbent on me to say that £90 million has already been spent. That shows our commitment to ensuring that services in West Cumberland are of a consistent and proper level. Nevertheless, I will find out what the blockage is. I know there is a problem with increased costs and the fact that, as anticipated, the budget has been broken. We cannot have a situation anywhere in the NHS where, just because a budget is broken, we pay for capital increases, but I shall ensure that that particular matter is addressed as quickly as possible and that that is not part of the success regime reasoning, as it is part of a phased deal for that hospital.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman raised the issue of GPs. I know that he will have noted NHS England’s announcement last week about the improved deal for GPs: there will be in excess of £2 billion over the Parliament to increase support for GPs. A lot of that will be going into under-doctor areas and those areas into which it is hard to recruit. Those are subtly different things, but both apply to Cumbria. I hope that, over the next few years, he will see the impact as the 5,000 additional GPs that the Government have committed to providing feed through to improved services on the ground.

West Cumbria and Cumbria as a whole are indeed a mark of whether we get the NHS to be a national service. Bevan coined the term “universalise the best”, but that also means universalising the best that we learn from elsewhere in the world. We must learn from elsewhere in the world about how to deal with scarcely populated areas and make sure that we have specific solutions for places such as Cumbria. We have not yet done that successfully, which is why I want the success regime to be concluded as quickly as possible, and with community buy-in, so that we can have the results that Members present want to see.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
North East Ambulance Service

[Mr Adrian Bailey in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the performance of the North East Ambulance Service.

We as a country pride ourselves on our world-class NHS services, which are the envy of the world. It is therefore always important that we highlight failures and shortcomings to ensure that our services do not fail our constituents when they need them most.

Strains on services are part and parcel of life in the NHS, but in recent years the pressures have been exacerbated by the Government’s policies. Ever since the Conservatives were elected to office in 2010, the NHS has struggled due to their mismanagement. In particular, the Health and Social Care Act 2012 implemented a costly, top-down reorganisation, which was neither needed nor wanted. It led to a disjointed funding model and resulted in my local ambulance trust, the North East Ambulance Service, running an expected budget deficit of £3.5 million for 2015-16. It comes as no surprise that I have received a growing number of complaints and concerns about the NHS in recent years, which is why this northern group of MPs decided that we had to call for the debate.

All the services that the NHS provides are important, but when someone suddenly falls ill in an emergency such as a stroke or a heart attack, or has a fall or an accident, it is understandable that they have high expectations of our ambulance service. The important work that paramedics do in our region day in, day out is undeniable, but, as the cases that my constituents have brought to my attention and those that have been reported in the press show, patient safety is in jeopardy. That is mainly due to waiting times, which, as the cases I will outline illustrate, have increased and are causing distress to many of my constituents.

For red 1 and red 2 cases—potentially life-threatening incidents—the trust remains below the national standard. Although that is reflected across the country—only two ambulance trusts in England met red 1 standards—it is concerning that, in our region, that failure has continued for the past three years, despite the fact that our response time of eight minutes is higher than the national average. That is exacerbated by the fact that red demand calls have increased by 21.3% in the past 12 months. The performance targets for the fourth quarter of 2015-16 were breached, leading to the trust’s third consecutive quarter breach.

I called this debate to give myself and my fellow north-eastern colleagues the opportunity to raise cases and concerns directly with the Government to ensure that our constituents receive the very best standard of service, which they rightly expect. It is right that we raise concerns with the Government, who are ultimately responsible for the service and can ensure that something is done about the problems we raise. I will touch on some of the many cases ranging from 2012 to 2016 that my constituents have brought to my attention, and I know that other Members will do the same.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this extremely important debate. I am very concerned about the mismanagement. That was highlighted to me when I wrote a letter to the North East Ambulance Service about ambulance services in Teesdale. I got a letter back headed, “Ambulance services in Weardale”. The worst thing that happened was to Violet Alliston, whose partner rang three times in an hour. No ambulance came, and she died. That is obviously totally unacceptable.

Mrs Hodgson: I thank my hon. Friend for that very sad example, which I fear and predict will be one of many—perhaps not all with such a tragic ending—that we will hear this afternoon.

The correspondence I have received about ambulance waiting times in my constituency makes it clear this has been a persistent problem since 2012. I was first told about the problem with waiting times by the league chairman of the Wearside football league after he raised concerns with the North East Ambulance Service directly about numerous incidents. In his correspondence, he said that waiting times for football players who had broken their leg had continually gone over 70 minutes. In one case, after a player broke his leg, the league chairman called 999 at 11.40 am, but he was called back and informed that no ambulance was available and that he should take the player by car. He rang 999 back and complained that that went against what trained first aiders were told about not moving people with broken bones. An ambulance then arrived at 1 pm—80 minutes after the initial call—and the young man was taken to hospital.

Ever since that case, I have received a range of correspondence from other constituents highlighting failures and shortcomings in ambulances going out to emergencies. An issue particular to my local area—I do not think it is replicated in other parts of the region, although we may hear differently when other colleagues speak—is that ambulances struggle to get to certain parts of my constituency due to confusion in finding the address. That has been repeatedly brought to my attention by my constituent, Mr Walker, who for the past two years has highlighted the difficulty that ambulance crews have getting to the Usworth Hall estate in Washington. When a shocking murder took place in the area in 2014, the ambulance did not arrive for more than an hour and the man died.

An example of that failure happened when a woman was in labour and her sister-in-law had to deliver the baby because the ambulance went to the wrong street. The children of the woman in labour had to search the streets for the ambulance. When they found it, they guided it by foot, as they were not allowed on board, for more than a mile to where it should have been.

I could give many other examples. It has been a persistent issue for the residents of Usworth Hall, who, through Mr Walker, have highlighted their concerns and their exasperation at those problems. On each occasion, I forwarded their concerns to the North East Ambulance Service, which looked into each issue. To its credit, it has tried to address them. That was highlighted in a letter to me in July 2014, in which it explained that it had set up an electronic flag system for all residents in Usworth Hall and had a duty manager from its control room go out and survey the area for problems. However,
Mr Walker contacted me again at the beginning of April and informed me that an ambulance was parked outside his house one evening. When he went out to speak to the staff, he found that they were lost and supposed to be in another street.

Paramedics understandably do not have the local knowledge that residents have, but sat-nav equipment is provided to help ambulances get to the right destination at the right time.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend think that those delays could be because of the shortage of paramedics and the fact that, as the service has admitted, it uses volunteers and private contractors to provide ambulances? That exacerbates the problem of people not knowing how to get to where they need to be.

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I will come on to the shortage, which is running at about 15%, and the stress on paramedics, to which she alluded.

If the sat-nav equipment continues to fail, and if my interventions on behalf of my constituents and the ambulance trust’s action do not rectify the situation, there needs to be a serious investigation into what is going wrong. We cannot have our ambulances driving round lost on estates looking for the right street.

My most recent piece of casework is from February and is deeply concerning. It concerns my constituent, Mrs Ellen Sherriff. I feel that using the words emailed to me by my constituent’s husband, Mr David Sherriff, can help to highlight the situation and the distress that can come from having to wait hours and hours for an ambulance to arrive. I hope that you will allow me a moment to read out Mr Sherriff’s words, Mr Bailey. He said:

“Ellen became unwell at 10.35am yesterday morning with severe head pain on the right-hand side. She felt like she was going to pass out. I checked her blood pressure which was very high, so phoned 111 at 11am and spoke to a call handler who told me he was sending an emergency ambulance and not to be worried if it arrived with blue lights.

‘Two and a half hours later no one had come. Ellen remained unwell and could not stand any light. I phoned 999 and was told the ambulance that was coming had been diverted to Cramlington but that we would be next unless a more urgent call came in.

At 2.40pm, a patient transportation ambulance arrived with two ambulance men. I asked why it had taken so long. They said given the circumstances Ellen should have been seen earlier. They had no equipment, not even a blood pressure machine. They said they couldn’t risk moving Ellen in case they caused the bleed in her brain to become life threatening and they would send for an paramedic. They would also remain here till he arrived. They also said she should have been in hospital 5 hours earlier.”

It was not until 6 pm, more than eight hours after the initial phone call, that my constituent, Mrs Sherriff, was admitted to hospital, where it was discovered that she did indeed have a bleed in the brain and that she should have been there much sooner.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): The whole system in the north-east is now simply not working.
service, creating a great hole. There is a role there for Government, perhaps, to talk to the whole organisation, to see what can be done to put a stop to that.

**Mrs Hodgson:** My hon. Friend makes a valid point, which I will touch on, although he made the case well. We have to look at the slippage, to where in the rest of the health service the paramedics are haemorrhaging, and why. I will say more about that in a moment.

Paramedics are there to treat people and give them emergency—perhaps life-saving—healthcare, but before they can even start to treat them, they might first have to calm the patient and relatives down, because of something that was completely out of their hands. It is therefore no surprise that, nationally, there is a shortage of qualified paramedics, and all trusts are struggling to fill vacancies so that they can operate at full capacity. The North East Ambulance Service has a 15% shortage, and is plugging the gap with private and voluntary organisations, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside mentioned. The service has said, however, that it will be up to full establishment in a year, but how many more people will wait for hours and hours before we get to that stage?

Something therefore needs to be done about the recruitment and retention of paramedics, especially since evidence has shown that more staff are leaving the profession than ever. Also, mental health charity Mind reported that 62% of blue-light emergency service workers have experienced a mental health problem and, worryingly, one in four has considered ending their own life. It is shocking to think about the stress that those people are working under.

It is no surprise that research conducted jointly by Unite, Unison and the GMB revealed at the end of last year that more than 1,500 paramedics had left the service in 2014-15, compared with 845 in 2010-11—still a high number, but a little more than half the later figure. Of paramedics surveyed as part of other research, 75% had considered leaving the service in 2014-15, compared with 845 in 2010-11—still a high number, but a little more than half the later figure. Of paramedics surveyed as part of other research, 75% had considered leaving the profession due to stress and pay.

Action therefore needs to be taken on recruitment, which is why I welcome the work of my local university, the University of Sunderland, which in partnership with the North East Ambulance Service has launched a diploma programme in paramedic practice. It will pair theoretical study with practical training over two years, and it will help to address the shortages faced by not only our regional trust, but other trusts around the country. That innovative work by my local university, alongside that of the outstanding paramedic practice degree at Teesside University, which is seen as a beacon of best practice in our region, if not the country, is important and will help.

It is, however, unsustainable not to address strategically the staffing shortages and the increasing demoralisation of a workforce who are haemorrhaging away, because that is clearly having an impact on waiting and call-out times for emergencies. That is why I hope that the Minister will address those concerns, and outline what the Government are doing to deal with recruitment and retention. How will she work with my local ambulance service trust to ensure that it reaches the target of being fully operational by this time next year? How will the ambulance trust ensure that those who are recruited into the field are retained and do not slip off to work for other parts of the health service, so that we do not see further shortages down the line?

It is important that our emergency ambulance services are up to the standard that we all expect. That means working collaboratively among ourselves, as the local Members of Parliament who represent our constituents and their concerns, and with the Department of Health, NHS England and the North East Ambulance Service Trust. Our constituents deserve the best standards in our NHS, and it is up to the Government seriously to address pressures on our NHS services, especially the case of the workforce in the ambulance service.

I hope that the Minister has listened carefully to my concerns, and will listen to those that my colleagues from the north-east who have attended the debate today express. I look forward to hearing what she has to say at the end of the debate.

**Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair):** I will call the Front-Bench spokespersons at 3.40 pm. Simple arithmetic will demonstrate that if I am to get everyone who wants to speak to speak—I want you to speak as well—you need to confine your remarks to about six or seven minutes. I will be grateful if you follow that guidance.

2.49 pm

**Mr Nicholas Brown** (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): I wish to make a brief contribution to the debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing a debate on a matter that is of importance throughout the north-east of England. This is an important service, run by good people under extraordinary pressure. To give an example, on Monday 7 December last year, there were 1,837 emergency calls to the service. That is equivalent to new year’s eve and was a 46% increase on the year before. That was accompanied by 1,664 calls taken by the 111 service.

The service is fast becoming a gateway to healthcare as others become more difficult to access and some, such as walk-in centres, are no longer there at all. Repeated requests to the public to call the service only in life-threatening situations can do only so much. I accept that a certain amount of problems are caused by hoax calls and other misuse of the service. People who do such things are completely irresponsible and stand to be condemned, but that is not at the heart of the problems faced by the service in our region.

I would like to touch briefly on a number of issues. The first is commissioning, which is not one of the strongest features of the Government’s national health service reorganisation. How focused are the commissioners on the service they are supposed to be in charge of? Are they working alongside the chief executive in a supportive and encouraging way? When has their role ever been reviewed or carefully considered by those in charge? There is a case for looking at that and at staff morale, as my hon. Friend rightly said, and asking ourselves why it is as it is. Surveys of the service show that 90% of staff are stressed. That is consistent with the picture that came from her address—and no doubt will come from colleagues—of a service that is trying to do its best under enormous pressure.
Like my hon. Friend, I welcome the establishment of the diploma of higher education in paramedic practice, which will start in September at the University of Sunderland. That two-year course has been created to try to meet the shortage of paramedics in the region as well as the national shortage. Evidence suggests that the grading of posts may be too low, and I would be interested to hear the Minister’s views on that. It seems odd that, in a region such as the north-east, where unemployment levels are still higher than the national average, there should be a persistent vacancy rate of between 10% and 15% in the service.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): One of the issues raised with me on recruitment challenges is that it costs £1,200 to get a driving entitlement for C1 vehicles. For many people, that cost is extremely prohibitive and constituents have said to me that that has put them off applying for those kinds of jobs.

Mr Brown: My hon. Friend is on to a good point. There is something odd if, in a region of higher than average unemployment, it is difficult to fill those vacancies not just in a single moment in time but persistently. We should look at all barriers to entry into the service. I accept what she said, but I harbour the thought that gradings may have been set too low and that there is a case for upgrading the job.

I have two other points to mention briefly. Legal highs are again putting more pressure on the service as young people in particular misuse them. I suggest that it is not a good idea to take them at all, but taking them results in the ambulance service being called out. There were something like 20 incidents, including a cardiac arrest, in a single day—8 February—and so far this year there have been about 300 call-outs because of the use of legal highs. I harbour the view that they should not be legal, but perhaps that is a different debate.

Finally, I want to mention the pressures that will be put on the service if the supported accommodation proposals that the Government are considering come to pass. If vulnerable people who are housed in projects and given support to lead their day-to-day lives are denied that support and left to their own devices, the consequence for the police, accident and emergency services at hospitals and ambulance services will be much greater, rather than lesser, pressure. That is not the right direction of travel for our society.

2.56 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I represent a very rural seat in north Northumberland, where, in January 2015, we had the tragic case of the entirely avoidable death of a young man because an ambulance did not get there in time. The Secretary of State instituted a national review on the back of that to look at the issues that triggered that tragedy. I am grateful for that, and we have made progress.

Some issues have come out of that, and the North East Ambulance Service should be commended. In my area, ambulances go to Northumbria hospital—our new emergency-only hospital. Some colleagues have already mentioned that we have been seeing the queuing of ambulances as they arrive at the various hospitals. I am not familiar with the wider north-east hospital framework, but at Northumbria it was quickly evident that that was a problem. To its credit, the North East Ambulance Service sent a paramedic to help in the triaging process, along with a specialist nurse who was diverted from other duties, to improve the process when the ambulances arrive—the hospital knows when they are going to turn up because they phone ahead—and to do a better job in ensuring that patients were removed from said ambulance and that the kit was returned to paramedics so that they could crack on with the next case.

That has been working well. We have seen a much speedier process, so I would commend that to colleagues, who could encourage other hospitals in the region to look at doing that. That has been an investment, but without doubt the cost-benefit not directly to the hospital but to the overall health package for our constituents has been hugely improved, because ambulances are back in the system. We were also then able to ensure that Northumberland-based ambulances were coming back up into Northumberland and not being taken to 999 calls elsewhere in the region, leaving paramedics working 14 or 15-hour days to get the ambulance back to Berwick or Alnwick. I commend the ambulance service for listening on the challenging problems we had and trying to make improvements.

At Northumbria hospital, the figures for urgent and emergency attendances read like this for the past three months: January had 12,911, which was a 12% increase on 2015; February had 13,731, which was a 30% increase on 2015; and March had 15,146, which was a 24% increase on 2015. However, only 24% of those cases needed emergency hospital admission. Something is broken. We are overloading our ambulance service with calls that demand an emergency ambulance, but, once at the hospital, only 24% needed emergency care.

My concern is twofold, and I ask the Minister to look at how we can make progress on this. First, the algorithm that the 111 and 999 systems demand that staff in the call centres use is dramatically risk-averse. I do not want anyone who is having a cardiac arrest to be told they have heartburn and not be sent an ambulance; quite the opposite should happen. However, a few years ago, the North East Ambulance Service built the lower-level 111 system and tested it before it was rolled out around the country.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I hear what the hon. Lady says, but is not the real problem that 111 was rushed in and relied on technology? When it originally started, we had trained paramedics in the call centres who could categorise cases. There is clear evidence, which I will present, that, if something is not deemed life-threatening or someone is not having difficulty breathing, the case is categorised as green. The figures produced are meaningless.

Mrs Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comment. Quite a few of my constituents were among those experienced staff. Some were retired midwives or had worked as nurses and then moved into the call centre framework. There was a big shift a few years ago to downgrade the medical professionals who require for those staff. We are starting to see a change in that, because the new chief executive is mindful that the huge increase in demand is partly down to staff’s inability to
assess cases correctly. If they took another 30 seconds, they could assess properly the situation on the end of the phone.

Will the Minister work with the people who are writing the algorithm and building the system to get it right? The ambulance service personnel would then have a better tool to work with. That would also encourage ambulance services, and not just our own in the north-east, to go back to higher-value trained personnel who can ask the right questions and get the right answers, so that we do not end up with over 70% of emergency calls ending in someone getting to hospital and finding that urgent care was not needed.

The other side of this issue, which I have been campaigning on with St John Ambulance, is the need to help families to be better educated so that they can assess their own medical conditions. Other than for cardiac arrests, strokes and such evidently dramatic changes, it is often not emergency care but urgent care that is required. We need to encourage people and build their confidence in assessing for themselves whether they should go to the pharmacy or the doctor or call for an emergency service. We need to do that across the board, focus on it and drive it forward.

St John Ambulance wants to get into every single school, so that we are teaching young children the difference between what to do if they burn their finger on the kettle—put it under the tap, instead of dialling 999—and what to do in an emergency, such as if granny falls down the stairs. The next generation would then have confidence in knowing the difference between when emergency care is needed and when they can manage and find the right care over a longer period.

Our paramedics will not be able to continue meeting the demand, much of which is inappropriately placed on the ambulance service. We should make much better use of our amazing paramedics and ensure that retention is higher, because they are valuable members of our community.

3.3 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this debate. In the past 18 months, I have heard about 12 quite serious cases. The ambulance service is in crisis, and that is not down to the men and women who work in it; it is down to the management. Urgent action is needed if we are to avoid people dying and prevent the suffering that my constituents are going through.

I will give a flavour of that suffering. In July 2014, in Chester-le-Street, a woman’s husband has severe angina. The first responder arrives and says he needs an ambulance. Three hours later, the ambulance arrives. A gentleman falls in Chester-le-Street from a six-foot fence and bangs his head. He is told to stay and wait for an ambulance. He waits two hours for an ambulance that does not arrive, so his neighbour takes him to hospital. A lady in Sacriston, which is about 10 minutes from the local hospital, has severe abdominal pains and is passed out, unconscious, waiting two hours for an ambulance to arrive. In Tanfield Lea, an 86-year-old lady has a fall at 9.30 pm on 13 February. Her partner is told by the ambulance crew not to move her. After several calls, the ambulance arrives on Saturday morning at quarter to 1. Apparently it had been diverted to Newcastle.

Patient transport is also an issue. One constituent, who had had a stroke and severe mobility problems, was waiting for patient transport to a medical appointment but was told that the ambulance would not attend. Another constituent from Stanley was transferred from his home to the Freeman hospital for regular dialysis. He had to wait two hours for transport back home, leaving him in severe discomfort. Another constituent who lives in Chester-le-Street found a young lady passed out outside her front door. She called an ambulance, and an hour and a half later, the ambulance arrived.

In New Kyo, a constituent complained that a young woman was having a fit in the local bus station. One hour and 10 minutes later, there was no response. She called the police, and they got the ambulance to arrive. Another constituent from Chester-le-Street needed to be transferred from Bishop Auckland hospital to the university hospital of North Durham. The request was made at 5 pm. She arrived in hospital at 1 am the following morning.

In Beamish, a lady fell down a flight of stairs and called an ambulance immediately. The first responder said she should not be moved. Two and a half hours later, an ambulance arrived. In March this year, an elderly lady in Sacriston—literally a 10-minute ride from the local hospital—waited an hour and 47 minutes in the cold north-east winter, being comforted by her neighbours with blankets, having broken her shoulder.

The last case I will touch on, which I have permission to mention, was raised with me by Mrs Irwin in east Stanley. Her 69-year-old mother-in-law, Joyce Irwin, had a fall on 14 March at 7.20 pm. Her son, who lives with her, came home and rang for an ambulance at 7.25 pm. He was advised by the controller that an ambulance would be there within the hour. Nothing happened. Her eldest son arrived and rang both 999 and 111. The first responder arrived at midnight, without any pain relief, and Joyce Irwin therefore had to wait until 11.10 am—for a four and a half hours later, having been on the floor in excruciating pain—for an ambulance to arrive. When she was finally delivered to the university hospital of North Durham, she found she had a broken hip. It is worth reading what Mrs Irwin says. She states clearly that her mother-in-law was in excruciating pain and was promised an ambulance that she did not receive. She says that Joyce has “worked and paid her duties all of her life”.

Is that the way to treat our constituents in the 21st century? I suggest not.

There is something severely wrong with the North East Ambulance Service. I have a particular problem with the way in which it treats elderly people. My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West said that the service is missing its targets for red 1s and 2s, but fall cases such as those I mentioned are not even put down as red 1s and 2s; they are put down as greens. In many cases, these are elderly people who have broken bones and are in severe pain, but they are put down at the bottom of the queue. Will the Minister interrogate the hospital trust about the way it is prioritising cases?

I have been told anecdotally by a firefighter and a policeman that if someone wants an ambulance to arrive quickly, they should ring them up and say that a person either has chest pains or is unconscious. They will
then get an ambulance straight away. In this day and age, it is not acceptable that our constituents—elderly, vulnerable people like Joyce Irwin, who have done the right thing all their lives—are treated like that. They have worked hard and paid into the system, and they expect in their old age that if they need the NHS in an emergency, it will deliver. It is not only the individual who is affected. The trauma also affects their families and loved ones, who, in Joyce Irwin’s case, saw her on the floor for four and a half hours in excruciating pain. That is simply not acceptable.

May I also ask the Minister to tackle the North East ambulance trust about its response to Members of Parliament, because it is absolutely diabolical at responding to Members’ complaints? I have had many complaints from people who have called an ambulance when they have seen an incident and they ask why the ambulance took so long. When I inquire, the ambulance trust responds, “We cannot discuss that case because of patient confidentiality,” because the complainant was not affected. That is complete rubbish. Those people do not want to know what happened to the individual; they just want to know why an ambulance did not turn up. It is interesting that we have got this debate today, because I recently had a flurry of answers to my questions, but I say to the Minister that there is a serious issue about how Members of Parliament can represent their constituents who complain to them.

I have a similar problem—if the Minister wants to intervene, that would be helpful—with the North Durham clinical commissioning group, which has failed to answer any complaints at all, so I have raised the matter with NHS England. There is something seriously wrong with the North East ambulance trust, although it is not down to the hard work of the individuals who work for it. They do a tremendous job in very difficult circumstances. There is also a question about the priority system that uses algorithms, as the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) suggested.

There is a question about rurality as ambulances are diverted to more urban areas rather than rural areas. I did not think I would say this, but it might be time to break up the North East Ambulance Service and put it into special measures. It covers a large area and is completely failing. Will the Minister look into whether it is fit for purpose in the long term? I do not think it is. Urgent action is needed. People are not only suffering, but they have lost faith in the service, which is a terrible thing. What should be a flagship service—North East Ambulance Service—that people call upon only in a time of need is clearly failing.

3.12 pm

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this debate. I declare an interest as a former chairman of the northern region of the National Union of Public Employees and as a former president of Unison. For 15 years I had the privilege of representing ambulance staff. I first became their representative a year after they were described by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) as little more than glorified taxi drivers. We were in the middle of an ambulance dispute at the time, so he probably did not really mean what he said, but there is one thing for sure: the staff are true professionals trying their hardest against insurmountable odds to try to deliver the quality public service that we all rely on, and it was to them I turned for this debate.

A constituent of mine retired from the ambulance service last year due to stress-related illness. I asked him, “What is the picture today? Can you give us some idea?” and he sent me an email this morning in which he said a number of issues have been going on for quite some time. He said that there is huge pressure on the services, especially over the winter period, and they ask the public to call only in genuine emergencies. Increased waiting times outside A&E hold up crews continually. The shortage of funding and paramedics results in long waiting times for patients. He goes on to say that they rely on charities to supplement the shortfall. They recently had to call on a charity to supply volunteer doctors over Easter to help with the response to the most urgent calls. There is a shortage of at least 15% of qualified paramedics and a large increase in the use of private companies, but the capabilities of such staff are not known. According to Unison, staff stress levels have increased and 90% of staff say they have suffered work-related stress owing to long hours and staff shortages. One member is quoted as saying that the levels are dangerous. There is also the ongoing issue of the Government continuing to put pressure on people whose morale is low by keeping in place an eight-year public sector pay freeze. People doing very important work are being penalised for doing it.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), I asked my office to give me a snapshot of the information that people have been feeding to us. I will quote from some emails. Pam, who lives in my constituency, wrote:

“Hi Dave, developed a problem with my left leg which according to 111 merits an emergency ambulance to take me to A&E. I have had a phone call from a paramedic apologising for the delay but please can you tell the Tory toffs that I have waited 2 hours for this ambulance and still no signs.”

Someone from Swalwell, near the very busy A1 in my constituency, wrote:

“An old man, aged 74, had to wait (lying bleeding on the cold ground in the rain) for 80 minutes for an ambulance. He fell just outside of my house...He was bleeding profusely throughout the entire 80 minute wait. Another neighbour repeatedly called for the ambulance and kept being told they were busy and that ambulances were being diverted to more urgent cases. We were unable to move the gentleman because of the amount of blood he was losing and also we weren’t sure if he had broken anything. He was cold and uncomfortable lying on the wet pavement. I brought out pillows and blankets. Other neighbours brought out bandages and towels and held umbrellas over him. I ended up calling a friend of mine who is a nurse, specialised in head injuries. She arrived very quickly and was able to work out that he was bleeding so heavily due to medication he was taking which was stopping his blood from clotting.”

She concludes:

“I understand there are limited resources but an old man lying in the rain bleeding heavily should not be left for so long. By the time the ambulance arrived, his wife was feeling dizzy and struggling with...shock.”

A 76-year-old went to a councillor’s surgery in my part of the world. She told the councillor that she had had to wait an hour and a half for an ambulance and
that when she was contacted she asked why she could not go to the hospital in Hexham, which is closer and where she would normally go. She was told that she was not allowed to go there. She had to go to the Queen Elizabeth hospital, which is at the other end of the A1 and in rush hour is a nightmare to reach. However, they insisted, so she had an hour and a half of waiting and then went to a hospital that made the wait even worse.

Another constituent, Mrs Waller, wrote:

“I recently contacted your secretary...regarding my husband...who is a palliative patient, he had a fall in the bathroom 14th March at 10.05 am and it was 15.20pm before an ambulance arrived. I rang 999 which was the advice given if this ever happened, I had to make a further two calls and my husband’s palliative nurse also made a call as well”,
as did my secretary from my office.

“I do not wish to have a go at the ambulance service but this is the problem that Mr David Cameron has caused due to the cutbacks in the NHS. No one should have to spend almost five and a half hours on a cold wet room floor. There was no way I could get my husband up due to his reduced mobility because of his cancer.”

The North East Ambulance Service is in the Minister’s remit. Basically, she is presiding over unmanaged decline. A hands-off attitude is unacceptable and not worthy of such a cherished institution. My hon. Friend the Member for North Durham spoke about the people who created the health service: the people who can remember what it was like before 1948 and how desperate it was. They have paid into the service all their lives and it is a cherished institution in this country, yet it is being rubbished because of the failure of the service that is on our doorstep. We must give the people who run and work in the service the chance to get it back where it was. The Minister needs to talk and listen to the people on the frontline.

Also, we need to listen to the people who pay for the service and for all of us to stand here and talk about it. They are the people who are important in this debate and they are the people who are being let down. The Minister needs to take action and put the ambulance service right.

3.18 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. Great credit must be given to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for securing this timely debate.

The North East Ambulance Service is not creaking at the seams; it is totally and utterly broken. It is in meltdown, and that causes great concern. As has already been said, there is a total lack of any confidence at all in the North East Ambulance Service among the residents. It is failing people of all ages in their time of most need. As my hon. Friends have said, we must place on the record our thanks for the commitment and passion of the workforce in the North East Ambulance Service.

Unfortunately, there is a staff shortfall of between 10% and perhaps 15%, which has been mentioned. That puts huge stress on the remaining individuals, who must make up for the shortfall. My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West mentioned a young fellow playing football, who broke his leg on the pitch. Now, you would expect an ambulance to come and pick you up, wouldn’t you? Is that too much to ask if someone is lying in agony with a broken bone from playing football on a cold Saturday afternoon? Of course they would want an ambulance. We cannot just push people to the side and wait, and explain to them, “There’ll be somebody coming shortly.”

That is not even the most important example. Everyone who has spoken has given examples of what has been happening—mainly to elderly people. There are lots of elderly people in my constituency—Mrs Robson, for one. She is 78 years old. She slipped on a pavement in the middle of winter. She had to wait one hour and 40 minutes for an ambulance; but the message that comes is: “I’m sorry; you’re going to have to wait, because it is not at crisis point. You are not an emergency.”

Of course she is an emergency. If a 78-year-old lady is lying on the floor crumpled in absolute agony, that is an emergency; but on paper—“Sorry, you’re not an emergency.”

I will tell hon. Members what happens. Someone rings up, and they have got a crib sheet in the central office. My hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) mentioned that if someone is unconscious or has got pains in the chest, the service will come to them. The first question is “Are they conscious? Are they breathing?” “Yes.” “Right. Are they bleeding?” “No.” Then, if they are conscious and not bleeding, they are put right down the pecking order. Quite frankly, it is simply not acceptable.

Mary Glindon: Does my hon. Friend agree that the morale of the call centre staff has been lowered? They can no longer care when they talk to people, but are like call centre handlers, with things being very automated; and they do the minimum to reassure patients because everything is down to time and hitting targets. They are no longer people dealing with callers who are in distress. They are not able or allowed to show any emotion or any support, because they simply have to deal with the call as quickly as they can, to get on to the next one.

Ian Lavery: What I am saying is not meant to be any criticism of the people in the call centre, either—because if they veer from the crib sheet they have got, they are in trouble; but it shows how bad the whole situation is.

I want to mention Mr Taylor. I must say that he is a relative of my wife, who waited 11 and a half hours for an ambulance to arrive. He was really poorly. Plenty of
people came from the NHS and said, “He needs an ambulance”—and then someone says “He doesn’t” and someone says “He does,” and someone else says “He doesn’t.” When he actually got the ambulance, at 1.45 in the morning, he was in a coma. That was seven months ago, and he is still lying in a coma as we speak. If that ambulance had turned up before, he might not be.

I will not dwell on that point other than to say that that brings me on to the complaints procedure, because MPs have complained, as well, about what happens to our constituents. We get a chronological list of what happened, and why the ambulances could not come, because they were diverted to other more serious incidents. That is not good enough. It is not good enough for me to say to one of my constituents, “Your mum couldn’t get an ambulance because somebody else was more important”—when she was lying suffering. Or if someone has a terminal disease and is desperate, or someone has a chest disease—it is not good enough; and the complaints procedure is not good enough. They are not treating people like human beings.

I have got lots to say and not a lot of time to say it, but I am going to reiterate the fact that these delays are utterly unacceptable and we cannot continue on this basis with the North East Ambulance Service operating as badly as it is. Someone mentioned that the service will be fully operational in 12 months. I have heard that before. It is not good enough for the people who will trip, fall and stumble. It is not good enough for elderly people, or young people playing football.

Mr Kevan Jones: My hon. Friend has obviously had the same letter from the North East trust that I have had; but does he agree, also, that it is not good enough because it is a question of our constituents’ confidence in the service? It should be a first world service, but it is more reminiscent of the third world.

Ian Lavery: I fully concur with my hon. Friend’s sentiments, and I am pleased about that intervention, because I think I might otherwise have needed an ambulance myself. I feel as if my blood pressure is getting exceedingly high.

More seriously, we have to look at the North East Ambulance Service now. We cannot announce a review in weeks to come. We have got to get to the bottom of why the service is operating so badly. It is not meeting its major targets in almost every single category. It has been mentioned that it may perhaps be put in special measures, or that it should be broken up. To be honest, I do not have the answers, but one thing I will say is that the Government have to look at the North East Ambulance Service and improve it in the same way as in other areas of the country. There is no reason why people in my area, in the north-east, should be treated any differently from anywhere else in the country. We need to get hold of the situation immediately.

3.27 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), not just for securing the debate, but for the passionate and thoughtful speech she gave, which got right to the heart of the issue. She articulated something that has been brewing among my constituents since I was elected last May. It gives me great concern and I want to share some experiences I have had.

Like my colleagues, I have become deeply concerned about the pressures on the North East Ambulance Service and their impact on my constituents. If someone is waiting for an ambulance, they are probably at one of the most distressed and vulnerable times of their life. Every minute waiting for an ambulance feels like an hour. Every moment is precious—vital; and there is a critical impact on people’s distress levels, and, as we have heard, their chances of survival. The Government must look at the situation to make sure that the service improves. I have heard far too many stories from constituents about people waiting several hours for an ambulance to arrive. As others have mentioned, that has affected elderly people particularly, and not just in minor cases—people who are elderly and vulnerable.

I want to mention a recent case, which happened just last month. A 72-year-old woman in Marske in my constituency fell and fractured her hip in the centre of the village. She was left lying in immense pain on the pavement in the freezing cold. It is a seaside town and she was left virtually on the sea front for three hours. Thanks to members of the public and many local business owners who came out of their shops, she was cared for by the community; but we can imagine not just her distress but the distress and horror of the community at seeing such a thing happening in their village—someone at a vulnerable time in her life, waiting in agony for the ambulance that they had paid for with their taxes, and which they expected to come to support a community member. It was completely unacceptable that she had to wait in pain for so long.

Another constituent, an elderly lady of 99 years who was born during the first world war, fell in her home at the end of last year, breaking her hip in three places. She was in so much pain that her family did not want to transport her themselves so they called an ambulance. Again, it arrived three hours later. She was 99 years old. What sort of society are we? If a 99-year-old woman who has had a fall and broken her arm is not an emergency and top of the priority list, I cannot imagine who is. Thankfully, she was at home in the warmth of her house and not outside on a pavement, but who is to say that she would have been any more of a priority if she had been outside on a stone-cold pavement.

As many of my colleagues have said, something is wrong with the prioritisation of people, particularly of elderly people, who have paid, worked and strived for their whole lives. How can we as a society look ourselves in the eye when that is how we treat someone who was born before the NHS started and has contributed to the system?

A local district nurse told me recently of another incident, involving a bed-bound patient with a suspected ruptured bladder. Although a blue light was not needed, the patient required an urgent ambulance. They were given an initial response time of one hour, but the ambulance eventually arrived after five hours. That waiting time was completely unacceptable; and again, there was an issue of the ambulance being diverted.
That is important. If ambulances keep being diverted to more important calls, the original call becomes increasingly more urgent. The knock-on cost of the crisis in the service and the level of support that people need falls on the NHS, but more cruelly on those affected, in the increasing danger they are in while waiting longer and in the agony and the tragedy they experience. That is where cuts have a serious impact, because they cost more down the line, as the service becomes increasingly crisis-led and ambulances are diverted to more urgent calls. What was a lesser priority becomes more urgent and more costly to the NHS and the individual's life.

In highlighting these cases, I am not criticising the work of paramedics and switchboard staff, because they do a fantastic job on the frontline that I do not think I could do. We owe them a massive debt of gratitude. They work under extreme pressure, dealing with people in life-or-death situations, and often in dangerous situations. Many are underpaid or struggling with their terms and conditions. They sometimes have to deal with distressed or angry families, and who can blame those families when they have waited hours and seen their loved ones in agony while failing to get the most basic service they need?

I want to comment on the failure of the North East Ambulance Service NHS Trust. According to the ambulance clinical quality indicators, the North East Ambulance Service takes longer than any other region in the country to answer calls. It also has the highest number of abandoned calls in the country. Colleagues have given plenty of examples showing that the service is in crisis and cannot continue as at present. Our elderly and vulnerable constituents are suffering.

Constituents have told me that a crew said that the Teesside service has a lower headcount than it should have and that ambulances have had to come from Durham, which is why we get delays. Parts of the north-east are geographically spread out and rural, and it is just not acceptable that ambulances are having to come from Durham. The morale of our ambulance workers is low. They are overstretched and, despite their heroic efforts, pressure is leading to targets being missed and patients and our constituents suffering.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister what the Government plan to do to tackle the problem and ensure that the investment they have promised for the NHS will go to this vital, front-line service in the north-east to save the lives of our most vulnerable constituents.

3.34 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this very important debate and on the eloquent way she made the case for her constituents, as have other right hon. and hon. Members for their constituents. People deserve a better service from the North East Ambulance Service.

I join other Members in praising the dedication and commitment shown by the thousands of paramedics who work in the NHS today. They are the best the NHS has to offer and they work under incredibly difficult circumstances delivering life-saving treatment. I add my thanks for the service they provide to us and to all our constituents every day of the week. Although ambulance services continue to deliver a good service for most, as we have heard today, they do not do so for everyone and the service is patchy across the country.

Members have spoken in detail this afternoon about the difficulties facing the North East Ambulance Service and the poor care that many patients have received from it. Over the past few years, the North East Ambulance Service has seen a dramatic deterioration in its performance against national response time standards. Between June 2012 and March 2013, the trust responded to 77% of the most serious emergency calls within eight minutes but, three years later, only 70% of ambulances were arriving within eight minutes. That is compared with the national target of 75%. The decline in standards is even worse for other emergency calls: that figure has fallen from 77% to 62%.

Behind each of these statistics are seriously ill patients and tragic stories of failed care. I hope that my hon. Friend will allow me to say that, when researching this matter, I was deeply shocked to read about an elderly man in her constituency who was told in December that he faced a five-hour wait for an ambulance after collapsing from a suspected stroke—a five-hour wait for an ambulance on the street in the middle of December. That is not what we should expect for our loved ones from our NHS.

When the Minister responds, I hope she will set out what actions the Department of Health is taking to prevent such incidents from ever happening again. The sad truth is that that decline in performance is not restricted to the north-east. The House of Commons Library has forecast that this year only three trusts in the whole of England will meet the national performance target for responding to emergency calls. The service in England has met the target only twice during the past 12 months, and more than 45,000 seriously ill patients have had to wait longer than eight minutes for an ambulance to arrive.

That is a worrying decline in performance. Too many people are being failed by the system and services are starting to fray at the edges. What does the Minister intend to do to improve the quality of care provided by ambulance trusts in England? What conversations has she or her colleagues in the Department had with NHS England about the performance of this ambulance service? What assessment is the Department making of the impact the decline in standards is having on the rest of the NHS in this region?

As we have heard, the truth is that that decline in performance is a symptom of a system that is at breaking point. All aspects of emergency care, from ambulance services to A&E departments, are struggling. In February, A&E departments in England reported their worse performance on record, with just 88% of patients being treated within four hours, compared with a target of 95%. During that period, every hospital in the north-east missed its A&E target and one in 10 patients had to wait more than four hours in A&E before receiving treatment.

Dr Cliff Mann, president of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, told a national newspaper the month before last:

"The pressures have become unrelenting. In recent days I’ve been contacted by a number of senior doctors, medical directors, high-level people, who are saying the situation now is like nothing
they’ve seen before... My own hospital had the busiest day I had ever experienced two weeks ago—these are situations where every time you turn round, there are another four ambulances queuing.” Those are worrying reports. I ask the Minister to address some of the concerns raised by Dr Mann and to say whether she believes that they are isolated incidents or whether those pressures have become the norm in our NHS.

The North East Ambulance Service’s board has acknowledged that the decline in A&E services has had an impact on its performance. The trust’s most recent board paper said that there were 59% more handover delays of more than one hour in the first quarter of 2015-16 compared with the previous year and 60% more delays of more than two hours. The reality is that too often ambulance crews with vulnerable patients have to wait outside A&E departments because hospitals just do not have the space to admit them. I hope that, when the Minister responds, she will offer an explanation for that decline in A&E performance and explain how she will help trusts to turn the situation around, because A&E is struggling and in need of help.

Staff shortages are also a key factor contributing to the challenges facing the North East Ambulance Service. The region currently reports 15% vacancy rates for paramedics, which puts added pressure on existing staff. Local unions have warned that nine in 10 north-east ambulance staff are suffering from work-related stress due to excessive hours and staff shortages. Across England, the recent NHS staff survey found that almost half of ambulance staff felt unwell as a result of work-related stress and one quarter say that their employer does not take positive action on health and wellbeing.

It is clear that not enough is being done to support ambulance staff, and that is bad for patient care. Unhealthy staff mean unhealthy patients, and we cannot allow that situation to continue in the north-east or elsewhere in England. I therefore ask the Minister what steps her Department is taking to address staff shortages in the ambulance services in the north-east and across the country. Does she agree that more needs to be done to support the health and wellbeing of front-line paramedics?

It is clear from the speeches that we have heard today that this trust is struggling against a number of key performance indicators that are widely available. I hope that, when the Minister responds, she will agree that patients in the north-east deserve better than that. I hope that she will also agree that we cannot allow that dramatic decline in performance to continue and that something has to be done to stem the tide.

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank all who have contributed to this important debate. Some extremely serious issues of principle and general practice and some very serious constituency cases have been raised. I doubt that I will be able to deal with some of the specific issues, particularly in relation to individual constituents, during the debate, but I have made a careful note, as have my officials, of some of the specific points and we will go through Hansard after the debate and ensure that we pick up individual points. I am extremely disappointed to hear that colleagues have not always found the trust as responsive as they would wish. I spoke to the chief executive yesterday in preparation for the debate and will certainly go back to that specific point, but I will come to some of the other general points as I move through my speech.

Mrs Hodgson: Will the Minister give way?

Jane Ellison: It is quite early, but I will.

Mrs Hodgson: I just want to say that we are all aware that the chief executive, Yvonne Ormston, is new and has obviously inherited many of the cases. I would like to say that things have massively improved. I know that she is trying to turn the situation around, but what has happened will not all have been on her watch.

Jane Ellison: The hon. Lady makes that point very well and with her characteristic generosity of spirit. I am sure that that will be noted. I will take the issue forward with that very much in mind and I thank her for her comments.

Ambulance services are obviously vital to the healthcare system. We have heard this afternoon some of the reasons why. They provide rapid assistance to people in urgent need of help. Hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber have rightly put on the record their appreciation of the work done by staff in trusts across the country and by the front-line staff in the NEAS. I add my thanks to theirs. Inevitably, we bring problems before the House—that is right, because we want to talk about how we can move things on for our constituents—but it is possible for a member of staff reading the record of a debate afterwards to think that we had only blame and criticism. Today, however, all hon. Members have been careful to praise the very hard-working staff. As has been said, they are working under quite considerable pressure.

It will probably be helpful to provide some context about the national picture. We recognise that the NHS is busier than ever, which is why we are backing the NHS’s own plan for its future, the Five Year Forward View, with an extra £10 billion by 2020-21. The challenges faced by the North East Ambulance Service are reflected in many services across the country. Ambulance services are facing unprecedented demand, delivering over 2,800 more emergency journeys every day compared with 2010. That demand has an impact on performance indicators, such as response times, with ambulance services continuing to struggle with their targets. The Department is working closely with NHS England and with NHS Improvement to monitor and support performance in 2016-17.

In relation to the North East Ambulance Service, I spoke briefly to the service yesterday, in addition to having received quite a detailed briefing from it ahead of the debate. I am advised by the NEAS that the average number of the most serious incidents—red incidents—that it has responded to within eight minutes has changed very little over the past three financial years, but the volume of red incidents to which the NEAS has to respond to reach the 75% performance target has increased by more than 20%, from 370 a day in August 2015 to more than 440 a day now. That change in demand in particular has placed our front-line emergency care services under real pressure, rather than the responsiveness and capacity of service provision.
Mr Kevan Jones: I hear this from the Minister and I hear it from the trust, but could I ask her officials or NHS England to actually delve into the figures? The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan) raised an interesting issue. This is actually about the ways in which ambulance calls are classified. There are clearly reds that are not reds, but the other point that I would like the Minister to address, even if she cannot answer it today, is the way older people are being treated, because they are being put down as greens, whereby they get no priority at all, and they are some of the most vulnerable people in our community.

Jane Ellison: Indeed. I have very much taken that point on board and I will try to respond, but if I do not do so today, I will certainly write to the hon. Gentleman, because it is a fair point. The more generic point is where the ambulance service sits in terms of our response and general position on urgent and emergency care. I will respond to some of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), because I think that this sits within a wider, systemic challenge and I want to touch on that.

Every patient should expect to receive first-class care from the ambulance service, but the nature of emergency response work means that there will always be incidents in which unfortunate timing leads to a person assessed as being in a non-life-threatening situation calling 999 at the same time as several other people who are in life-threatening situations. I am sure that hon. Members are realistic about that, but clearly we do not want to hear about such problems occurring on a very regular basis. Where does that occur, obviously the life-threatening situations must be prioritised and resources focused on those calls. Very rarely—unfortunately, we have heard about such cases this afternoon—waits may be unacceptably long. I do not shy away from that, but it is important to remember that the vast majority of people receive a timely response when they dial 999.

I have already said, echoing the words of the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who led the debate, that although the NEAS has not met the performance targets, that does not reflect on the hard work, dedication and skills of the local staff. A number of speeches brought that out. I am advised that although ambulance delays are the main reason for patient complaints, the number of complaints received in 2015-16 fell, but we do not want any complaints; that would be the situation in an ideal world. However, the fall is indicative of the fact that the efforts of the local ambulance staff are paying dividends. Although the performance target is effective in driving efforts of the local ambulance staff are paying dividends. That goes to the shadow Minister’s point about looking at the wider system. That will be to the benefit of crews and emergency departments. I understand that, as part of the vanguard, the NEAS also hopes to secure funding for a new “flight deck” information system that will enable divers by ambulance crews to other hospitals to be proactively managed and will prevent ambulances from stacking up outside already full A&E departments. The trust believes that those initiatives will help to distribute A&E workload evenly and will be welcomed.

Several hon. Members have rightly commented on the recruitment challenge. It is very much recognised that there is currently a shortage of paramedics nationally and the NEAS trust is no different. We recognise that front-line staff are the vital component of a safe, effective and high-performing service, and work is being done by the NEAS to rise to the recruitment challenge. The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West mentioned some things that are being done. Efforts include developing new advanced technician roles to support front-line services, and the trust is running a substantive recruitment of paramedics nationally and internationally.

The trust expects 77 student paramedics to graduate by February 2017, in addition to recruiting an additional 36 qualified paramedics in 2016-17. The trust has also recruited a total of 56 emergency care clinical managers, and that represents a significant investment in front-line clinical leadership. It also advises me that it expects to be up to full paramedic establishment by April 2017. I know that that commitment will be keenly watched by hon. Members.

Mr Anderson: Ambulance staff, along with other public servants, have effectively had an eight-year pay freeze. Their standard of living has gone down every
year for the past eight years. Comparative jobs, particularly in the private sector, have not seen that level of control. There have also been pointers that the situation will not be alleviated in the next two or three years at least. Does the Minister not see that as a real reason that people will not come into the job? Yes, it is a vocation, but people have to put bread on the table.

Jane Ellison: Of course I accept that issues of pay are incredibly important. Although we cannot go into the wider economic picture, I gently say that the previous Government and this Government have made reducing the tax bill for some of our lowest paid public servants a huge priority. A huge amount of money is being spent on raising the threshold and that has made a huge difference to people's take-home pay and standard of living. However, I hear the hon. Gentleman's point.

I am encouraged that the trust is looking to the future by doubling the number of places on its two-year in-house graduate training programme. Hon. Members have made several thoughtful points regarding some of the wider issues around recruitment and retention. Maintaining staff morale has been mentioned. That is very important and the trust is looking at whether things could be done, other than pay, to attract and retain paramedics. We are looking at that nationally. The debate sits in the context of urgent and emergency care.

Ian Lavery: Will the Minister give way?

Jane Ellison: If there is time, because I want to get to a really important point right at the end of my remarks, and I am starting to run the clock down. Will the hon. Gentleman make his intervention very brief?

Ian Lavery: I thank the Minister for allowing the intervention. She mentioned the fact that we will probably be fully operational by April 2017. Will she guarantee the people of the north-east that she will take action to ensure that the NEAS will look after the people in our area in the intervening period?

Jane Ellison: I intend to follow up on this debate with my colleague in the Department of Health, Lord Prior of Brampton, who leads on the topic, and I will follow up with the service itself. I will make sure that all points raised by hon. Members are drawn to its attention.

The root causes of the increase in demand often lie outside the hands of the ambulance service. NHS England's review of urgent and emergency care is taking a system-wide approach to redesigning the way that care is delivered. It is important to look at the provision of ambulance services in that context. We need to ensure that people with life-threatening emergency needs are treated in centres of excellence to reduce risk and maximise their chance of survival and recovery. The first part of that is about relieving the pressure on emergency services.

The response time targets are being considered as part of NHS England's review to ensure that they incentivise the most clinically appropriate response. My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed and the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) talked about having the clinically appropriate response in all contexts. I will ensure that we pick up on those points and draw attention to them. We hope to have advice from NHS England later in the summer on potential changes to ambulance standards in the context of that wider review of urgent and emergency care.

Mr Nicholas Brown: Will the Minister give way?

Jane Ellison: No, because I have an important point to make at the conclusion. If the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me, there might be another opportunity.

Ambulance services are vital to emergency care and the whole NHS. We all want to be sure that when loved ones suffer heart attacks or are involved in a serious accident, they will not be left waiting, although we have heard about some distressing cases. National targets in response to red, life-threatening calls exist to ensure that that happens, and we all have an interest in ensuring that the ambulance services perform well against them. I will follow up on the points made in the debate.

I draw hon. Members' attention to the fact that a comprehensive Care Quality Commission inspection was carried out at the NEAS during the week commencing 18 April 2016. CQC's formal report will be important for all hon. Members and Ministers to read. In the light of the strong feelings expressed in the debate, I think it would be appropriate for hon. Members whose constituencies are served by the NEAS to meet my colleague, the noble Lord Prior of Brampton, who leads on this portfolio, when the report is available to discuss. I hope that that will be helpful for hon. Members. In the context of that report, many of the points made this afternoon can be discussed with Lord Prior. I encourage all hon. Members to engage with the local NHS and to continue to work together to address the challenges in this critical element of our healthcare system.

If the right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) can make his intervention in less than a minute, he may do so now.

Mr Nicholas Brown: How does the Minister account for the rise in demand for the service?

Jane Ellison: I definitely do not think that that question can be answered in less than a minute. Much of the answer lies in the work that Sir Bruce Keogh is doing as part of the NHS's wider urgent and emergency care review. It is vital that we get people the right care in the right place at the right time. It is a complex picture, of which ambulance services are just one piece. More will be said when we know more about that review later this year.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the performance of the North East Ambulance Service.
Knife Crime (Sentencing)

[PHILIP DAVIES in the Chair]

4 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered sentencing for knife crime.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab), for being here to respond on behalf of the Government.

In this House we are all deeply concerned about rising levels of knife crime. When I was elected in May last year, I pledged to my constituents that I would do all I could to address the scourge of knife crime. Why? Because Colchester has seen too many young lives destroyed by crimes involving weapons. Many in this House will be aware of the tragic murders of James Attfield and Nahid Almanea, both of whom lost their life far too early. Two weeks ago an individual was convicted of their murders, and he has been sentenced to 27 years.

Too many people, particularly our young people, still find it acceptable to carry blades and knives. They wrongly believe that doing so will keep them safe, but let us be clear that carrying a knife does not keep people safe; it is illegal and it puts them and others in grave danger.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing such an important debate. Does he agree that education is a huge part of the solution in Derby to educate parents and children, are a way forward in addressing such crimes?

Will Quince: My hon. Friend is right that education plays a key role, and I will return to that later in my speech. We have to get the message out loud and clear that, statistically, people are far more likely to be the victim of a knife crime if they are carrying a knife themselves.

What is troubling about the case involving James Attfield and Nahid Almanea is not just that the perpetrator was only 15 at the time of the murders but that, on 26 March 2014, he was in court being given a youth referral order for criminal damage and robbery at knife point. Seventy-two hours later, he stabbed James Attfield 102 times. Three months later, he brutally murdered Nahid Almanea with a knife.

I understand that, under our legal system, judges decide the appropriate action in each case, taking into account a number of different factors, including the facts of the case, the age of the offender, the maximum penalty and any sentencing guidelines.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. He is making a powerful case. We also need to consider access to knives. I have come across a case in the west midlands involving the so-called “zombie” knife, which is a brutal weapon up to two feet in length and including several serrated blades. It has no practical usage, yet it is available online for just £8. Will he comment on access to knives?

Will Quince: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The Government have introduced measures on “zombie” knives. Where there are such weapons that serve no purpose other than to cause damage to another individual, it is absolutely right that the Government take action.

As Members of Parliament, we must trust judges to make the right decisions. However, there is undoubtedly a feeling in my constituency that the judiciary failed my constituents. There will also be people across the country who question how someone who robbed a newsagent at knife point, regardless of age, failed to receive a custodial sentence.

To be fair, the Government have done much to address knife crime. I welcome steps such as minimum custodial sentences for repeated knife possession and the commitment on police budgets, but we need to do more on education. I am fortunate to have two fantastic charities offering weapons awareness training in my constituency: KnifeCrimes.org, run by Ann Oakes-Odger, and Only Cowards Carry, run by Caroline Shearer. Those two inspirational women lost their sons to knife crime. There is a strong case for schools to teach pupils about the dangers of carrying knives.

Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con): In Derby we have recently had reports of increased levels of knife crime. Last week, somebody was threatened with a penknife in a school. Does my hon. Friend agree that projects such as Project Zao, which is run by the police in Derby to educate parents and children, are a way forward in addressing such crimes?

Will Quince: I agree. There is no question but that education will play a key role in addressing knife crime. There is no question but that there is a strong case for more schools to teach pupils about the danger of carrying knives. As I have found, Ministers regularly throw back the challenge that the demands on the curriculum are great, which I accept, but we are talking about one 45-minute lesson in years 9 or 10. I do not believe that would be a huge burden on the curriculum.

The purpose of this debate is to consider whether enough is being done on sentencing. It is often said that sentencing guidelines are just that, “guidelines, not tramlines.” I appreciate the need for judges to have discretion to sentence according to the circumstances of each case, but let us look at the statistics. In 2015, there were 54 instances of 10 to 15-year-olds being convicted or cautioned for threatening with a knife or offensive weapon, of whom three already had two previous convictions for possession of a knife or offensive weapon. Two of those three received a community sentence. Despite having already been sentenced twice, they received, in effect, a slap on the wrist.

Let us look more generally at simply possessing a knife or offensive weapon. In 2014, 2,725 10 to 17-year-olds were sentenced for possession of a knife or offensive weapon. In 2015, the figure went up to 3,103, a rise of 14%. Of those sentenced for possession of a knife or offensive weapon in 2014, 44 had two previous convictions and 17 had three previous convictions. How about last
year? Seventy-five had two previous convictions, an increase of 70%, and 27 had three previous convictions, an increase of 59%. It is deeply troubling that we are sentencing more and more repeat offenders for carrying knives.

Let us look at first-time offenders. Of those sentenced in 2014 for possession of a knife or offensive weapon, 2,398 had no previous convictions. In 2015, the number went up to 2,699 with no previous convictions, an increase of 13%. If we are sentencing more and more children with no previous convictions for knife offences, is our approach to deterrence working? Lord Thomas, the most senior judge in England and Wales, said in 2014:

“There is obviously a really serious problem in relation to knives. The carrying of knives has become commonplace in gangs and with children who are very young... I think we need to look very, very carefully at the best way of using the various levels of sentences to control the use of knives. I think this is something which is urgently required. We’ve been extraordinarily successful in this country in controlling the use of guns, but knives, particularly knives carried by 12, 13, 14-year-olds, is a major problem... This is a problem which is very, very serious, which is rightly a real concern.”

I welcome the new “two strikes” sentence, which means that adults convicted more than once of being in possession of a blade face a minimum six-month prison sentence and a maximum of four years. Young offenders, aged 16 and 17, will face a minimum four-month detention and training order. However, there is no provision for those under 16. During a debate on 3 March 2016, I said that the answer to youth violence is threefold: deterrence, education and intervention. As I have said, I want the national curriculum to be modified to include weapons awareness training. The Government should take another look at encouraging more schools to introduce weapons awareness lessons.

On deterrence, let me be clear that I do not want to throw vast swathes of teenagers in prison for possession of a knife or offensive weapon; it is far better to rehabilitate them in the community. However, there are three changes that I would like to see.

First, where an under-16 with a previous knife-related conviction is found to be using a knife in any violent crime or offence involving threatening another person, there should be a mandatory detention and training order. I believe that, in those cases, there is enough doubt about the effectiveness of a community sentence that the public safety argument alone requires a custodial response.

Secondly, where an under-16 with no previous convictions commits a threatening or violent crime involving a knife or offensive weapon, there should be a mandatory psychiatric assessment in addition to their sentence. Finally, I would like to see any under-18 who is convicted or cautioned for a first-time knife-related offence to be sent on a mandatory weapons awareness course as part of their sentence.

Julian Knight: Would my hon. Friend like to see these interventions take place prior to sentencing or after sentencing?

Will Quince: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The psychiatric testing would almost certainly have to be done prior to sentencing, but the weapons awareness course, by its design, would happen as part of the sentence; it would happen after sentencing. I would see that working in a similar way to the speed awareness courses for someone who has been caught speeding. They have to go on a course. The courses are often very shocking, as they are hit with hard facts. Often, young people—especially first-time offenders—need a hard look at what could have happened and what could happen again if they continue to carry and use a knife.

I am aware that making law around a tragedy is often the wrong approach. However, the evidence suggests that we are sentencing more and more teenagers for first-time knife offences, as well as more and more teenagers with a history of knife-related convictions. This Government have rightly recognised the importance of tackling youth knife crime and I hope that they will take on board my suggestions.
Stephen McPartland: In the sentencing guidelines that the Minister quite rightly referred to, is there anything that allows judges to take into account whether or not the individuals concerned are members of a gang?

Mr Raab: I need to check the specific guidelines, but I think there is enough latitude for the courts to address that issue and take into account any involvement in a gang, and the particular characteristics of that gang, in relation to the sentencing framework. Of course, whether the courts place the right weight on that factor is difficult to say; as politicians, we can sit here and second-guess individual cases. However, I do not think there is any question but that judges have the power to consider all the facts of a case.

To continue with the measures the Government have taken, in July 2015 we commenced the provisions introducing a minimum custodial sentence for anyone aged 16 or over who is convicted of a second or further knife possession offence—that issue was raised earlier. I pay tribute to the tenacity shown by my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) and Nick de Bois, the previous Member for Enfield North, in securing that change to the legislation.

That is the law, but often the real question is: how well is it being enforced? The latest figures show that an immediate custodial sentence is now the most common disposal for knife possession, compared with 2010, when most offenders could reasonably expect to receive a community sentence. In the fourth quarter of 2015, 31% of all offenders convicted of knife possession offences received an immediate custodial sentence, compared with 23% back in 2010.

The latest figures also show that 38% of adults were given an immediate custodial sentence, which is an increase of six percentage points from a year ago and an increase of 11 percentage points since recording began in 2008. Over the same period of seven years, the use of adult cautions for this offence has more than halved. Sentencing for young offenders has also become more consistent—what point was rightly raised earlier. I pay tribute to the tenacity shown by my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North, in securing that change to the legislation.

In the fourth quarter of 2015, 10% of young offenders received an immediate custodial sentence for possession of a knife, compared with 6% in the same quarter of 2007. The average length of custodial sentence for possessing a knife has also increased. In the latest figures, the average length was 7.7 months, an increase of almost two months on the same quarter in 2008.

More people are being sent to prison, and for longer, for carrying a knife, which reflects the changes this Government have made.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Clearly, the sentencing that the Minister has been describing has been significantly tightened by this Government over the last few years, and I think all of us welcome that. However, does he agree that there is another side to this issue, which is about preventing knife crime in the first place? There is a real role for charities, county councils and police and crime commissioners to get together and ensure a serious education campaign in schools about the risks of carrying a knife and the devastation that knife crime can cause to the families who suffer losses as a result.

Mr Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; as usual, he hits the nail on the head. Of course, there is nothing inherently contradictory or inconsistent in saying that we want to send a very clear message from law enforcement and the criminal justice system, while also trying to do as much as we can through education and raising public awareness to prevent these awful crimes from happening in the first place—for the victims, but also for the offenders, who sometimes, through gullibility or naivety, get dragged into things that, with some education, awareness and nurturing, they could have avoided in the first place.

I want to refer to the Sentencing Council, because it is currently preparing a draft sentencing guideline on possession of knives and offensive weapons. It will be subject to full public consultation later in the year, which will provide an opportunity to inform the definitive sentencing guideline and the approach to be taken by the courts in dealing with these very serious offences. That will be another opportunity for us to consider whether we have got the balance right.

In relation to the question about gangs, having taken advice, I can confirm that if an offender is acting as a member of a gang, where two or more offenders are acting together to commit the offence, that is an aggravating factor in the sentencing guidelines and, of course, all courts must follow those guidelines. My hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) raised the important issue of gangs, and I am glad that I can provide some clarification about it.

The introduction of minimum sentences for offences of possession of a knife, blade or offensive weapon sends a crystal clear message: if people carry a knife, they can expect to face a custodial sentence. That message from the law enforcement community and the criminal justice system is crucial for victims, their families, the wider communities affected, the general public and those who might be tempted to break the law.

I am aware of the tragic murders by James Fairweather and the circumstances around that case. I note the interest and concern expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester. He will know that I cannot comment on individual court cases, as sentencing is a matter for the judiciary, independent of us politicians. I send my deepest personal condolences to the families of his constituents Nahid Almanea and James Attfield. I note that this is a complex case, given the mental health assessment of the perpetrator. I note in particular that four separate psychiatrists were required to give expert evidence at the trial. James Fairweather was sentenced on 29 April to detention at Her Majesty's pleasure with a minimum term of 27 years. I also note that the critical learning report into James Fairweather’s earlier offence and referral order concluded that the subsequent murders were neither preventable nor predictable. Clearly that is zero consolation for the victims’ families, and I reaffirm that in such cases as this, we always seek to learn lessons for the future.

Tackling knife crime is an ongoing high-level priority for the Government. As my hon. Friend has already mentioned, it requires a team effort across Government and law enforcement agencies. Knife crime offences
recorded by the police remain 12% lower than in 2010, but I accept that there is more to do. In February, we supported 13 police forces to undertake co-ordinated action against knife crime. That involved targeting habitual knife carriers, weapon sweeps, test purchases of knives from identified retailers and the use of surrender bins. A new week of activity was held at the end of April, with 11 police forces taking part. That is exactly the kind of preventive work that we should be doing, and we continue to attach a high priority to it.

In February, the Home Office jointly hosted a meeting with the Metropolitan Police Service and the national policing lead aimed at retailers selling knives. More than 80 retailers attended. On 23 March, the Government published the “Modern Crime Prevention Strategy”, which sets out a range of measures to strengthen our response to knife crime, including: working with the police and industry to ensure effective controls on the sale of knives and other offensive weapons; identifying and spreading best practice; and delivering measures designed to deter young people from carrying knives. As my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) called for, that will also include a ban on the sale and importation of “zombie-killer” knives, which so horrifically glamorise senseless violence.

When it comes to the sale of knives more generally, the law is clear that a retailer commits a crime if they do not take proper steps to ensure that they are not selling knives to under-18s, with the exception of smaller-bladed pocket knives. On 23 March, the Home Office agreed a set of principles with major retailers to prevent under-age sales of knives in their stores and on their websites. That point was made earlier. The Home Office will work with the British Retail Consortium to develop the principles and to encourage other retailers to sign up to them. We want retailers to buy into and be proactively engaged with them.

I am conscious of the time and, in particular, the fact that we have a vote coming up. In case others wish to contribute, I will quickly make a couple of points about the education of young people. That issue was rightly raised. We know that intervening early can stop young people becoming involved in the gang culture that fuels youth violence. On 17 November, the Early Intervention Foundation published a report setting out its research into the risks and protective factors that can lead to young people becoming involved in youth violence and gangs. It attached importance to early identification and intervention. The Home Office is working with the Department for Education to promote these messages to schools and children’s care homes, which are another important area.

I again take this opportunity to pay tribute to the vital work that my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester does at a local level in Essex with the local charity Only Cowards Carry. That is incredibly important work. A lot of that localised work is as important, if not more important, than the stuff that comes out of central Government. We have a role to play in supporting and spreading awareness of that work. There is also Charlie Taylor’s wider review of youth justice, which provides a timely opportunity to assess the causes of youth offending and how better to respond to drive down reoffending.

Ridding our streets of the scourge of knife crime will remain a high-level priority for the Government and for future Governments. We can never be remotely complacent, not even for a moment. That means educating youngsters to steer clear of knives and gangs in the first place; preventing retailers from selling knives to youngsters; targeting the police response in the most effective possible way—that, I suppose, is the role of the Ministry of Justice—and continuing to send a clear message from the criminal justice system that carrying knives will not be tolerated and that those who do are more likely than ever to be sent to prison, and to be sent to prison for longer.

Question put and agreed to.

Philip Davies (in the Chair): In five minutes we are due to start the next debate. The Minister is not yet here—not unreasonably, because we are not due to start as yet. There will be a vote very shortly in the Chamber. Taking those factors into account, the sitting will be suspended until no later than 4.45 pm, after the vote has taken place. We will start back as soon as everyone else arrives. It is courteous to wait until the debate is scheduled to start, by which time there will be a vote.

4.26 pm

Sitting suspended.
Anglo-Russian Relations

4.40 pm

Philip Davies (in the Chair): For those people who have not done an hour debate before, the normal format is that the two Opposition parties get five minutes each for the winding-up speeches and the Minister gets 10 minutes. Hopefully, the Minister will leave a couple of minutes at the end for the proposer to wind up the debate. I intend to call the Front Benchers no later than a quarter-past 5 or thereabouts.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Anglo-Russian relations.

It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I called this debate because I am very concerned about the growing anti-Russian sentiment in the House of Commons. Even for having called for the debate, a senior member of the Government today called me “Comrade Kawczynski”. I have been accused of being an apologist for President Putin and criticised for even daring to raise this subject, so I have prepared a personal statement, which I hope you will allow me to make, Mr Davies.

Of all the Members of this House, I have deep and personal reasons to dislike and distrust Russia and its actions. As many hon. Members know, I am of Polish heritage. Poland suffered terribly at the hands of the former Soviet Union, and like so many Polish families, mine was no exception in experiencing that suffering. My grandfather was a successful landowner and farmer whose life was ruined by the interference of the Soviet system, which was often brutally unfair, corrupt and flawed. It would be easy to cling to prejudice and allow it to colour my view of the world today, yet as a British citizen and a proud Member of this House it is my job and my duty to argue strongly in favour of what I believe will best serve Britain’s long-term security, stability and prosperity, even if that means encouraging détente and dialogue with a country that was born out of the remnants of the oppressive regime that so crippled my grandfather in Poland.

I could not go back to Poland to begin with, because of martial law in the Soviet-imposed regime and what was happening in Poland, but when I first went back in 1983 and met my grandfather, he spoke to me at great length about what it was like living under communism. He spoke about the oppression during the second world war from the Soviets and the Russians. He died in 1986—just three years before the fall of communism—but before he died, he said to me, “I will never see the end of communism, but you will.” He knew that the financially illiterate and politically Orwellian system that the Soviets had imposed on us was completely incompatible with the human spirit and soul.

When I think of the period in which my grandfather died, during those early years of détente, I think of the extraordinary lengths Reagan went to to meet Andrei Gromyko in 1984. I think of how Margaret Thatcher met Gorbachev for the first time in December 1984, despite all the difficulties that we had at that time with the Soviet Union—it was still in Afghanistan and was posing a huge threat to our country. It saddens me that today there does not appear to be the same level of good will and determination among our Government Ministers to engage in the same way with the Russian Administration.

There is a one-sided debate, and it is all negative towards Russia. My experience over the past 11 years—you and I have been in the House for the same amount of time, Mr Davies—is that when we do not have proper debates in this House, that is when tactical and strategic errors are made. That is why it is so important that we debate this issue.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. May I suggest another reason why we do not understand Russia well enough? It is that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office needs greater resources to better understand events on the ground generally. It is a known fact, now widely recognised, that there were, for example, no Crimea experts in the FCO at the time of the Russian intervention in Crimea. Since the end of the cold war, the FCO has continuously wound down its Russian coverage. Does he agree that that needs to be put right, so that we understand events on the ground better, including the complexity that is Russia?

Daniel Kawczynski: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is a privilege to serve with him on the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. I very much hope that the report that we are starting on Anglo-Russian relations will delve deeper into some of the shortcomings and lack of resources available to the Foreign Office to understand Russia and our engagement with it better.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Daniel Kawczynski: I will, but briefly. Then I would like to make some progress.

Julian Knight: I thank my hon. Friend very much for giving way. He is clearly passionate and knows a lot about the subject. However, one shadow hangs over all this: the murder of Alexander Litvinenko. Speaking as an observer who comes to Anglo-Russian relations from a different angle—or from an angle that is not too used to them—that was a crime carried out on British soil, seemingly with the connivance of the Russian state, so until it is dealt with, our relationship will always be poisoned to a certain extent.

Daniel Kawczynski: I will come on to that later in my speech, but it is important that my hon. Friend also reads the Russian submission on the subject, which was made to the inquiry on Anglo-Russian relations being undertaken by the Foreign Affairs Committee. I very much hope that he reads it.

President Putin is now being treated almost as a pantomime villain in this House. I would like a pound for every time someone says, “The only person who wants us to pull out of the European Union is President Putin, because that will destabilise the European Union and cause difficulties.” In fact, the Russian Government are one of the few Governments that have not made any statement on the matter. Unlike certain people I could mention who have come to our country and tried to interfere in our domestic referendum, the Russians have
not made any official statements on whether they believe we ought to continue to be a member of the European Union.

I debated this issue at the Conservative party conference against a close friend, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), who is very hawkish towards Russia and has a very different view from mine. I respect him greatly and I voted for him to be leader of the Conservative party in 2005, but we disagree fundamentally on Russia. Amazingly, it was the one time at a Conservative party conference when I have been mobbed—in a nice way—by young people, because they were so surprised that a Conservative Member of Parliament was challenging the situation and talking about how to lower tensions with Russia and to improve relations. They were so pleased that someone was doing that and they wanted to engage with me.

The Foreign Affairs Committee is now undertaking a report on Anglo-Russian relations. We started to take evidence yesterday with two leading academics, Dr Derek Averre, senior lecturer in Russian, foreign and security policy at the University of Birmingham, and Dr Andrew Monaghan, a senior research fellow at Chatham House. They gave us a very enlightened view and a very different perspective from the one given by our Government. I am pleased to say that, later this month, as part of our inquiry the Foreign Affairs Committee will be visiting Moscow and spending five days there, meeting our Russian counterparts. To get the most balanced perspective, we will be returning to the region in July to meet people in countries that neighbour Russia—Ukraine will be one and Moldova another, but I will be participating in the second leg, which is a visit to Poland and Latvia.

I am pleased that I have managed to convince the Committee to visit Poland. Anyone who thinks that the distrust of and hostility towards Russia are bad in London should try Warsaw. The Poles are even more sceptical and antagonistic about Russian motives, and to a degree I am becoming very unpopular in certain Polish political circles for daring to challenge that. Why do I do it? I do it because I still remember what my grandfather said to me and the complete destruction of Warsaw in 1944 and thereafter. We must do everything possible to avoid war, and to avoid war for future generations. I am greatly worried about the ramifications further down the line if we continue this abject hostility towards Russia.

My intention is to make the report as robust as possible in order to highlight FCO mistakes in dealing with the Russians and to put forward constructive proposals on how our Government should be going the extra mile and showing the British public that they are straining every sinew to ensure that no stone is left unturned in our determination to seek a constructive relationship with the Russians and something we can work on towards peace.

As a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I had the privilege—I am not sure that it is a privilege—a few weeks of going to Brussels as part of the Committee’s delegation. There were 28 representatives from the 28 countries and we had an opportunity to meet Jens Stoltenberg, the Secretary-General of NATO. I posed the question to him: “What are you, as the Secretary-General of NATO, doing specifically to lower tensions with Russia?” In a public way he said something very constructive—much more constructive than I have heard from any British politician. He said, “Well, you know, I was Prime Minister of Norway. We have a border with Russia and I had to engage with the Russians on all sorts of different issues, whether to do with fishing, security or the Arctic circle and exploration. We built quite a good relationship with the Russians and we found it very constructive to engage with them.” Needless to say, I am delighted that the Secretary-General of NATO spoke in those terms in such a public way to me and other representatives during our meeting in Brussels.

It is not the politicians who suffer from the ongoing sanctions—we politicians will continue to receive our salaries and to do our jobs—but the small and medium-sized enterprises who have tried to work with and export to Russia and seen their exports blocked or destroyed. I represent an important agricultural community in which cattle farming is one of the main sources of income. As I could not make an official delegation to Bryansk in Russia, I sent a cattle farmer from my constituency to represent me. Those discussions went so well that ultimately the Russians sent 15 of their top agronomists to Shrewsbury to meet with us and spend time with our cattle farmers to try to understand the cattle industry in Shropshire. As a result of those discussions, I am proud to say that we struck an agreement with the Russians to lift the ban on British beef imposed after the BSE crisis. That is potentially worth hundreds of millions of pounds to the British cattle industry. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), who was then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, signed the agreement in Moscow, which would have led to great export opportunities in the cattle industry. Of course, all of that has been washed down the plughole as a result of the sanctions.

It is not just the beef industry. There are not any representatives from Scotland here, but the Scottish fishing industry is losing a great deal.

**Philip Boswell** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP) indicated dissent.

**Daniel Kawczynski:** I am sorry. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman will come on to say, the Scottish fishing industry is suffering greatly as a result of the sanctions imposed, as is the dairy industry. The Shropshire dairy industry is on its knees as a result of bovine tuberculosis and the lowering of prices that our farmers are paid by supermarkets. My Shropshire dairy farmers are going out of business in unprecedented numbers and all their exports to Russia—not just cheese and milk, but other dairy products—have been wiped out as a result of the sanctions.

I direct the Minister to some information I received from France the other day. Last week, the French National Assembly adopted a non-binding resolution inviting the French Government to lift the economic sanctions and other retaliation measures imposed on Russia by the European Union. The resolution was presented by a conservative Member of Parliament called Thierry Mariani. Although non-binding, several of his fellow conservative Members of Parliament have welcomed the move—in particular, former French Prime Minister François Fillon—and it will clearly put pressure on the French Government ahead of the next review of sanctions in July 2016.
Through their Foreign Ministry, the French Government factually stated that EU sanctions remain linked to the implementation of the Minsk agreements, and expressed their willingness to ensure the unity of the EU on this matter. That is very important. The French National Assembly’s resolution gives me the impression that many in the French Parliament want sanctions to be rescinded, and that they could be lifted if the Minsk agreements are implemented. What is the British Government’s perspective on that? The key question I would like the Minister to answer is: were the Minsk agreements implemented, would the British Government support the removal of EU sanctions? Or do they have an extra requirement, as I have been led to believe in the past: that Crimea would have to be returned to Ukraine before they would support the removal of sanctions?

In all my interactions with Foreign Office Ministers, I have been given the impression that the British Government would not support the removal of sanctions unless the Minsk agreements were implemented and Crimea were returned to Russia. As somebody who has visited Crimea on several occasions, I have to say that there is not a cat in hell’s chance of the Russians returning Crimea to Ukraine during the course of my political or biological life, and I will eat my hat if they do so.

Sanctions should be in place only with something tangible and achievable as the end result. I genuinely believe that, if the implementation of the Minsk II agreement were secured, that would be the sensible moment for us to start to talk to the Russians about getting rid of sanctions. If the Government’s attitude is: “No, we want Crimea returned,” they are doing us a great disservice by putting our constituents, ourselves, our prosperity and the likelihood of improving relations in jeopardy and peril.

I know others want to speak, so I will try to wind up quickly, but I want to say how pleased I was with the Iran agreement. We were facing the insoluble, difficult and highly complex problem of nuclear proliferation in Iran. I pay tribute to the Foreign Office and its diplomats for the leadership they displayed in securing the agreement. There is no doubt in my mind that the agreement would not have been achieved without the unique contribution of British diplomacy, but Russia was also a part of the agreement. It made an extraordinary contribution and is doing the heavy lifting on the agreement to protect the region and to protect peace.

The American Secretary of State, John Kerry, said in a press release:

“A number of commercial transactions made this shipment possible, with many countries playing important roles in this effort. Russia, as a participant in the JCPOA and a country with significant experience in transporting and securing nuclear material, played an essential role by taking this material out of Iran and providing natural uranium in exchange.”

That goes to show that, if we work with the Russians constructively, they can bring different things to the table. They have different experiences and different contacts. If we can work with the Russians on securing this vital deal with Iran, why can we not work with them in other important theatres such as Syria?

Mr Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He has spoken at some length about his background and heritage and, indeed, about the welfare of cattle and the potentially lucrative nature of the cattle business in his constituency. He mentioned the Minsk agreement but said nothing whatsoever about the reasons for that agreement, which were Russian aggression, the conduct of hybrid warfare and thousands of lives being lost in eastern Ukraine and, to some extent, Crimea. That cannot be simply brushed under the carpet. The Minsk agreement and the sanctions are there for a good reason. Will he address those points?

Daniel Kawczynski: We all know what led to the conflagration and the difficulties that ensued in Donetsk and Lugansk. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I am focusing on trying to secure peace now. Implementing the Minsk agreement and getting back to normalised relations are more important than what specifically led to the conflagration in the first place. I am glad he intervened. As I discussed with him yesterday, as a fellow member of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, he has said in the past that he thinks the British Government ought not to have ruled out military action over Crimea. He has stated that Britain should have potentially got involved militarily. Well, if he wants a third world war and nuclear destruction of both entities, he is going the right way about it.

Mr Hendrick: Will the hon. Gentleman allow me to correct him?

Daniel Kawczynski: Yes.

Mr Hendrick: The point I made was that I felt it was unwise of the Prime Minister at the time to verbally rule out military action, not on the part of Britain but on the part of NATO or anyone else. Saying nothing is far better than saying we will not do anything.

Daniel Kawczynski: Let us agree to disagree on that. I think that that sort of sentiment is highly dangerous and could lead to significant destabilisation in our relations with Russia.

The Russians believe we have acted unilaterally in the world, and they have seen some of the terrible difficulties we have got into with Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan. They want to ensure we can work constructively with them to bring peace about in Syria. As I have said, the Russians bring different things to the table. We need to compartmentalise the relationship. We can still disagree with the Russians profoundly over Syria and Ukraine, but let us get back to dialogue over matters of security and energy security while we continue to disagree with them. [ Interruption. ] I will wrap up my comments because you have indicated, Mr Davies, that I have spoken for long enough.

Russia has watched our disastrous intervention in Libya and our prevarication over Syria. Russians would argue that their intervention in Syria has helped to stop or temper the ongoing bloodbath of the past five years and that they have saved the European Union the misery and suffering of having to deal with hundreds of thousands more migrants coming across the sea to Greece.

When I think of the tremendous work done in Tehran, which I visited recently, between Churchill and Stalin to put their differences aside in fighting fascism during the
second world war—when we had even more differences of opinion with the Soviet Union than we do with Russia today—I think to myself that we ought to also have the courage and vision to put our differences aside and work with the Russians to fight modern-day fascism. ISIS poses a similar threat to both entities in Syria, Libya and on the streets of European capitals, with the bombing and terrorism that is taking place. Let us put our differences aside and work with the Russians to deal with that threat.

My final statement is this. On 15 March, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) said:

“The Foreign Secretary said that he has not talked to Mr Lavrov. Is that because Mr Lavrov is refusing to take his call, or that he has not yet tried? If it is the latter, why not?”

The Foreign Secretary’s response—I want you to remember this, Mr. Davies—was:

“Again, experience is the answer. I have not tried to make the call, and I am in no doubt that I could predict quite confidently the outcome of such a call to Foreign Minister Lavrov. I have had many conversations with him over the course of our regular meetings at Syria-related events, none of which has been fruitful.”


What a terrible statement to make: “None of my discussions with Mr Lavrov has been fruitful, so there is no point in making a telephone call.” No, no, no. The Government have got to change their stance and engage with the Russians, for the security of our country and the international community.

5.5 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Our relationship with foreign powers is, I believe, totally inconsistent. We chide Russia for abuses—and, by the way, nothing I say is pro-Putin; I am not getting involved in that. I am just talking about double standards. We chide Russia for abuses but kowtow to China, whose abuses are far worse. If we were outside observers looking at that situation, what conclusion would we draw? That there is a double standard; and that is the only conclusion that Russians draw. We in the west have failed totally to take into account the Russian mentality when dealing with these problems. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczyński) on the way he moved the motion, and on trying to understand how Russians think. That is important in framing our foreign policy.

Ukraine is a perfect example. The country is ideally placed as a bridge between the two worlds—Europe and Russia. Indeed, in Russian, Ukraine means “borderland”. To Russians, Ukraine is not a foreign country. Russian orthodoxy, as far as they are concerned, was founded in the Kievan Rus 1,000 years ago. We may not agree with this, but for them Kiev is as much the spiritual home of Russian orthodoxy as Canterbury is to us the home of the Anglican Church. Clever Ukrainian statesmen could have held a fine balance, playing one side against the other for the good of their country, as of course India did during the cold war. Instead, Europe and the west had to barge in with, I believe, an insufficient understanding of Russian or, indeed, Ukrainian history, or people’s thinking in the region.

We in the European Union invested millions of pounds, euros and dollars to influence Ukraine away from Russia and towards the west. Because one side insisted on owning the bridge and the other side, naturally, would not let it, now the bridge is in tatters and burning; and it is the ordinary people of Ukraine—and of Russia, subject to sanctions—who are suffering. Of course, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham says, Russia will never in our lifetime give up Crimea. After all, the Russians believe and know that the overwhelming majority of people in Crimea want to be part of Russia. So they believe that we are playing with double standards. They all remember that Kruschev signed away Crimea to Ukraine with a stroke of a pen in the mid-1950s.

The psychotic zeal for permanent expansion of the western European sphere of influence, at Russia’s expense, gains us nothing. Actually, all we have done is significantly destabilise our eastern flank; and what about the good of Ukraine? Crimea is now permanently lost to it. We know that—it is a reality. The eastern regions are enveloped in a low-level violent conflict. Whatever we may think of Mr Putin or the Russian Government, clearly our interference has not worked out for the benefit of people living in Ukraine. Russia can, we all know, with little effort or cost to itself—I am not defending it, just describing the reality—support and maintain a constant low-boil conflict in eastern Ukraine for some time.

Therefore, any real effort to secure peace, stability and the rule of law in Ukraine—and peace and stability is what we should be about, is it not?—must of necessity take into account Russian fears and interests. That is the reality on the ground. If it does not, and if we just take an absolutist line, imposing sanctions, putting the Russian embassy in London and the Russian Government into deep freeze, and not talking to Mr Lavrov, we will achieve nothing and there will be no prospect of success. What would that mean for the relationship between our two countries? Our strategy for Anglo-Russian relations should be to engage, engage and engage. By all means be firm, but engage.

Last week, I chaired an investment forum—I am chairman of the all-party group on Russia—and there is significant interest among British and European businesses in strengthening their presence in Russia. The Governments of Germany, France and Italy are actually increasing their business, unlike our Government. Given our historical alliances with Russia, the Russians cannot understand why our Government and our Prime Minister are outliers. They are way beyond the Americans, the Germans and the French in their anti-Russian stance. The Russians cannot understand it. Let us remember for a moment who, frankly, saved our bacon in two world wars. How many tens of millions of Russians died in Nazi Germany’s invasion? We should remember that, with the unfortunate exception of the Crimean War, Russia has for centuries been our natural ally. We are two powers on the eastern and western extremities of Europe.

If we respectfully and confidentially engage with Russia, we will get the most out of that relationship and start making constructive advances. Blind and mindless Russophobia gets us absolutely nowhere. We should build economic links, strengthen cultural links and seek to work together on issues such as defeating Daesh, where UK and Russian interests overlap. Daesh is our
enemy; Russia is not. Russia poses absolutely no strategic threat to the people of the United Kingdom. It does not and never has done in our entire history, but Daesh does.

Mr Hendrick: What is the hon. Gentleman’s reaction to the fact that Russian military aircraft regularly come into UK airspace in the full knowledge that it is UK airspace?

Sir Edward Leigh: Of course Russia is a great power, and it naturally tests defences as part of its training of its own people, but does anybody in this Chamber seriously believe that it poses a strategic military threat to the United Kingdom? We are no longer in the cold war; it is over. I do not defend Russian aircraft approaching the United Kingdom, but I do not think for a moment that there is the remotest chance of their actually engaging in military action with us.

Daesh is our real enemy. Allowing its reign of terror to continue simply because we dare not co-ordinate our plans with nasty Mr Putin is cutting off our nose to spite our face. The only winner in that scenario is Daesh.

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): If we are truly to help the people of Syria, as the Government purport to want to do, does the hon. Gentleman agree that we must have a positive and constructive dialogue with Russia—a key player in that theatre?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is precisely what my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham and I are saying and what we are trying to urge on the Minister. Assad and the Russians are not going to go away. As the Minister said very eloquently in the House of Commons yesterday, since the second world war, Russia has viewed Syria as an essential ally. I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman. On every level, we must be constructive, confident and respectful—and I mean self-respect, not just respect for the other side. The way we kowtow to China can reach demeaning levels, which is why I say we are engaging in double standards.

Mr Hendrick: The hon. Gentleman made a good point when he said that Russia fought on our side in the second world war. So did the Chinese. To illustrate the significance of this issue, Xi Jinping, on his visit to the UK, was very complimentary about British membership of the European Union. Although the Russian Government have not made an official statement about their position, President Putin is known to believe that the UK should be outside the European Union.

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a remarkable statement. How do we know what Mr Putin thinks? All I can say is that I have discussed that with the Russian ambassador, and he gives the correct line on behalf of his Government. Mr Putin has made absolutely no comment, certainly in public—we have no idea what he says in private. There is simply no evidence that Mr Putin is somehow engaged in some massive conspiracy to encourage Great Britain to leave the European Union. I rather think that in practical terms he has other things on his mind. Russia has made no statement in public. It is neutral on this matter.

Constructive, confident and respectful engagement is the best way for our two countries to flourish together. If we engaged in that way, the appalling conflict in Syria might have some chance of being brought to a conclusion. Assad will not go away and the Russians will not go away, so the Minister should pick up the phone and encourage his boss to pick up the phone to do what Kerry is doing and speak to Lavrov every week. That does not in any way mean support for everything Mr Putin does, but only with constant engagement in building relationships can we make some progress towards peace in Syria.

5.15 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for bringing this important debate to the Chamber.

As we approach the end of President Obama’s presidential term, it is helpful to remind ourselves that he started his presidency by looking for a reset of US-Russia relations. Before we move on to consider how the UK and NATO might be responsible for a share of the current crisis, it is worth noting that Russia could have been the principal beneficiary of any reset initiated by the American President, but instead pursued a policy that has made such thinking difficult.

From the occupation of Crimea to similar provocation in eastern Ukraine, Russia has shown scant respect for or acknowledgement of Ukraine’s sovereignty, something it had to agree under the Budapest memorandum. However, I have just returned from Moscow and the Kremlin and it is clear that the Russians see themselves as merely defending their own backyard. There have been many incursions into UK waters and air space. For those of us in Scotland where no Royal Navy ships are based, the feeling of exposure is real.

We have witnessed military exercises simulating invasion of the Baltic states. Do the Russians intend to intimidate peoples who peacefully asserted their right to self-determination and have gone on to become valued members of the European Union? We note these developments because it is vital to us as a NATO member and as a member of the international community to ensure that these small states are protected from any undue influence on Moscow’s part and that their sovereignty is protected. We do that not because we are allied to these states, but because small states play a vital role in the international system. They have consistently expanded international law to bring about the norms that are so important today.

Russia sees itself as a world power along with China and America and its view of Ukraine, the Baltics and the High North is that it is simply protecting its interests and its economic resources. However, we must not let the deterioration in Anglo-Russian relations, whether our fears are real or imagined, cloud our judgment of the new phase in our relationship with Moscow.

The Defence Committee, of which I am a member, has recently undertaken an inquiry into UK-Russian relations and it has become increasingly clear to me, the more evidence we hear underlining the threat that Russia poses to the west, that the debate is down to our inability to understand correctly where we stand as a
nation. Although we may not agree on everything in this debate, the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham has taken a vital step along that path.

Philip Boswell: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is long overdue not just for Britain, but for NATO to move away from this antagonistic position and instead to pursue a new, constructive relationship with Russia for the benefit of all?

Douglas Chapman: I agree absolutely with that statement. Our discussions with many ambassadors in Moscow last week suggested that there was almost a time warp of thinking at the moment and that people are still fighting the cold war and thinking it is still a reality. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace said that this is a new era and time for a new relationship with Russia, and that fighting the wars of the past is just not appropriate in the modern world.

We must also think about the UK Government’s position and where the blame lies for the current situation. Right from the start of the current Government, tough rhetoric has emanated from Downing Street and Whitehall. One would think that the UK knew where it was going on Russia, but the reality, the truth, is quite different. If people begin the discussion from the standpoint of seeing Russia as their No. 1 threat, that will not create a sense of trust or understanding with the Russian people or their Government.

In parliamentary answers that I and other Members have received in the past year, we see examples of disengagement at ministerial level. There is a sense that the UK has given up on trying to understand Russia properly. Not only have budgets for the BBC World Service’s Russian service been cut, but there are now only 15 members of Her Majesty’s armed forces who can speak Russian to a reasonable level. Substantial cuts are also forthcoming in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. They are aimed at devaluing our ability properly to understand Russia.

The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham cited the case in which we had discussion about the Syrian ceasefire and our own Foreign Secretary failed even to call his opposite number in the Kremlin. We cannot have it that our Foreign Secretary does not call, does not write, does not make contact with a key player in a country’s trade with Russia is modest and has been on a decreasing trend in recent years. Nevertheless, it is important that disruption to our trading relationship with Russia is kept to a minimum, because it has an impact on companies in this country and particularly on pension funds that invest in companies such as BP.

Outside the economic and trade interest, several main potential threats to Anglo-Russian relations arise as a result of Russian foreign policy, particularly in Ukraine and Crimea, and NATO’s response. They include: the presence of a number of Russians in the UK whom the UK has refused to extradite to Russia; Russian money—am talking about criminal money, money laundering of Russian criminal money in the UK and its impact on our society, which is largely on the housing market in the capital—and the UK’s response to recent Russian involvement in Syria.

The UK Government, in their 2015 national security strategy, stated that Russia’s actions in Ukraine justified a stronger NATO response, but deemed Russian military action against NATO “highly unlikely”. We have taken a quite pragmatic approach to Russia. We recognise that Russia is flexing its muscles, largely to impress and threaten those states on its borders, but is being very careful not to threaten larger and stronger states and organisations such as the UK, the EU and NATO. We would recognise that as typical bullying behaviour. Despite all that, the national security strategy, as has been said, seeks to build on successful co-operation with Russia where it can. We have seen that happen quite successfully in the Iranian nuclear programme and co-operation in seeking to address the global threat from ISIL/Daesh.

In the past decade, a number of controversial Russian figures have been granted political asylum in the UK, and the UK Government have refused to extradite them at the request of the Russian Government. That has put huge strains on the Anglo-Russian diplomatic relationship, with series of expulsions on both sides. However, whatever the rights and wrongs of Russia’s criticism of our asylum system, it is absolutely unacceptable that Russian criminals can come to this country and commit murder on the streets of London, as in the case of Alexander Litvinenko, only for the Russian Government to refuse to extradite those against whom a prima facie case has been established, in breach of international law. That case has renewed focus on Russian money in the UK, and its alleged links to Russian corruption.

In 2015, the National Crime Agency said that foreign criminals—it highlighted Russian criminals—are laundering billions of pounds of corrupt Russian money in London, pricing average Londoners out of being able to buy or even rent in central London. In 2016, the Prime Minister is to hold an anti-corruption summit and, among other things, I hope it will hold up a mirror to tax havens in the UK Crown dependencies and overseas territories, and so improve transparency in the UK property market.
Finally, I want to say something about the UK’s response to Russian involvement in Syria. Russia has a long relationship with the Government of Syria and regards Syria as being in the Russian domain of influence. However, the recent Russian military intervention has had mixed results. Human rights organisations working in the region have reported that the Russian military targeted hospitals and civilians, claiming that, in the six months to February 2016, Russian air strikes killed 1,000 civilians, including 200 children. Equally clearly, the Russian military intervention has helped to drive back ISIL/Daesh and, without doubt, it has strengthened the position of Bashar al-Assad and his Syrian army. It has also had some impact on forcing him towards a shaky truce, which we hope will solidify and, in the days ahead, include Aleppo.

It is clear to me that Vladimir Putin understands strength and weakness, and very little else. He alone supports the UK voting to leave the European Union, when every other world leader and organisation that wish this country well want us to remain in the EU. That can only be because he sees a Brexit as resulting in a weaker UK and a weaker EU, which he views as a good thing. Anglo-Russian relations will remain stable and, we hope, improve only if the UK remains part of a strong NATO, a strong European Union and a strong western alliance that is prepared to stand up to the aggression of its neighbour to the east.

5.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): This has been a well-informed and useful debate. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on bringing it to the Floor of the House.

My hon. Friend began with a personal statement and a reflection on his own journey and his understanding of the importance of such bilateral relations. I pay tribute to him for adding value to the House by bringing to our attention not only Russia, but other countries, and aspects of the relationships, concerns and issues that we might not necessarily have been aware of. That is important, and I pay tribute to him for it. I absolutely agree with him that we need to have such debates and that we need to understand better our complex relationship with Russia.

Russia is a country that I did not know an awful lot about before I came into the House. I took a huge interest in Afghanistan, but I had not really appreciated Russia and what had happened in Afghanistan until I did some reading. I read an amazing book, “Afgantsy”, by Rodric Braithwaite, who did a fantastic job in letting me understand the details rather than the headlines, which might often articulate a very different picture. I recommend the book.

The lesson there is to ensure that we continue to develop relationships, to have dialogue and to further, where we can, the bilateral bond that exists, despite some of the challenges that have been focused on today. There is no doubt an aspiration for a more co-operative relationship with Russia. Indeed, at the end of the cold war, I remember those amazing scenes with Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Gorbachev, and I remember glasnost and perestroika—these words became known and are now, I think, in the Oxford English Dictionary. The end of the cold war brought a new opportunity to re-engage with a country that, after the end of the second world war, had denied to Europe the chance to work as it should.

However, it is now clear that the integration of Russia into the international system was short-lived. Efforts were made to include Russia in the G8, the World Trade Organisation and the Council of Europe, of which my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) was an active member, and to address the Russian perception that the west was determined, and had a strategy, to encircle Russia. Efforts were made across those fronts and to mollify Russia and say that NATO is not a threat but a reactive organisation, ready to go proactive if required.

For a time, those efforts brought Russia and the international community closer together, but a more mature and co-operative partnership has not blossomed. Much that we now see is because of President Putin’s unfortunate disregard for international law and standards. One issue that affected us directly, and was on the front pages of all our newspapers, was the 2006 poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko, a British citizen, here in London with a radioactive substance. An independent judicial inquiry in January 2016 concluded that the crime was probably approved by the then FSB director, Nikolai Patrushev, which led to concerns about the manner in which Russia goes about dealing with those who wish to speak up or challenge what it says.

Other actions by Russia have also been raised in this debate, and concerns have been raised about its direction of travel. Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, and my hon. Friend talked about Crimea as if it had been written off. I wonder whether the people of Crimea are aware of how people in South Ossetia or Abkhazia are enjoying life now. They are completely isolated, and are recognised only by Argentina and Russia itself. The rest of the world has no formal relations with that part of the world. Is that really where Crimea wants to go? I do not know.

The occupation of Crimea in 2014 raises a question mark, and my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham asked the Prime Minister at Question Time whether he encourages greater relations. The international community must stand up when nations decide to redraw the lines on the map. It is important to recognise that the international community must work together, and we have seen Russia providing military support to separatist forces in eastern Ukraine in a blatant attempt to destabilise the country. The United Nations suggests that more than 9,000 people in eastern Ukraine have been killed, with more than 20,000 wounded. Sadly, the situation created the conditions for the Malaysia Airlines MH17 tragedy, in which 298 passengers and crew, including 10 British citizens, were killed.

All that instability, and human misery, was and is entirely avoidable. We can move forward from this—for those who are not aware, sanctions are divided into two separate categories: those affecting Crimea and those relating to the Minsk agreement on the eastern Ukraine—and, yes, we can get back towards more normalised relations if the Minsk agreement is recognised. It is in Russia’s gift to do so, and we encourage it to take the necessary steps to provide a diplomatic solution to the crisis that we face.
[Mr Tobais Ellwood]

On a positive note, despite our differences, there is no desire to isolate or ostracise Russia, or to push it away. Quite the opposite: we want Russia to be included in the international community. We have heard examples of the role that Russia plays as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, participating in a range of foreign policy priorities, not least on the Iranian nuclear deal, which has profoundly changed the trajectory of where the middle east may go—I say “may” because there are an awful lot of caveats and concerns. To date, Iran still has yet to change its behaviour and outlook towards places such as Bahrain, Yemen, Damascus, Syria and Beirut. Nevertheless, the people of Iran now have an opportunity and that has been brought about because of the collaboration between the United States of America, Britain, France and so forth and, of course, Russia.

Syria has also been mentioned, but I can only repeat what I said in the Chamber yesterday. We look to Russia, with its unique influence over the regime, to ensure that the cessation of hostilities does not break down. Russia has a unique relationship with Assad because of a historical relationship and an influence in that neck of the woods that goes back to 1946 and the independence of the country. We expect Russia, and want Putin, to place pressure on Assad to stop the attacks, and to allow the ceasefire to embed and peace negotiations to continue.

I would just mention to my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough that there has been a period of Russia unbalancing Syria, by not attacking Daesh, but deliberately attacking Assad’s opposition—and not only that, but denying airspace for us, the international community, to freely take on Daesh in the wider context of Syria.

On a positive note, there is an awful lot of engagement. The Prime Minister has met President Putin at the G20 summit, the Foreign Secretary does speak and engage with Foreign Minister Lavrov; on a number of multilateral engagements, and the Minister for Europe visited Moscow very recently indeed. I had the opportunity to meet President Putin at the European Games in Baku in Azerbaijan last year. I was not quite expecting to see him, but I told him that a friend of mine had cause to use Russian transport and was a bit concerned about international developments—the east and west—in case he got stuck at the end of his destination and was unable to get back. That friend of mine was called Tim Peake. He was using a Soyuz space capsule to get up to the international space station and did not want to be abandoned up there. Mr Putin grabbed my arm and said, “Mr Ellwood, tell Mr Peake that we will not abandon him.” That gives an indication that it is possible to isolate some of the enormous concerns we have. The sanctions that are put in place allow us to work on the international stage to tackle some of the problems. Culturally, professionally and, indeed, from an industrial and commercial perspective, we are able to continue those relationships.

Since the cold war, successive British Governments, quite rightly, have wanted Europe to build a strategic partnership with Russia. However, this Russian Government have made it clear that they regard the west with mistrust and view NATO—and, increasingly, the EU—as a threat to their interests. A fundamental divergence of values and interests, combined with the unpredictability of Russian behaviour, has increasingly limited the scope of Anglo-Russian relations, but the Government’s objectives regarding Russia are to protect the UK’s interests and those of our allies and partners; to uphold the rules-based international order in the face of Russian aggression; to engage with Russia on global security issues; in key areas of shared interest, to promote our values, including the rule of law and human rights; and to build stronger links between the British and Russian people more widely. That balanced approach is aligned to British interests and I hope that hon. Members of all parties can support it.

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Mr Kawczynski, you have just over a minute to wind up the debate.

5.38 pm

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank the Minister for his remarks and some of his positive comments. We need to show strength towards the Russians. We must make them realise that we will always protect our NATO partners in central and eastern Europe. I am very much in favour of trying to ensure that we have a permanent NATO base east of Warsaw, because those new NATO countries need to know that we are serious about protecting them. That is extremely important. My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), myself and others are looking to the Government to show an interest in the ability to engage with the Russians, to support greater cultural and scientific exchange with them, and to show us that they are doing everything possible to lower tensions at the same time as showing strength towards the Russians.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Anglo-Russian relations.

5.40 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Great Northern Great Eastern Upgrade: Compensation

1.30 pm

Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the matter of compensation for residents affected by the upgrade of the Great Northern Great Eastern railway line.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz, for what I think is the first time. Let me begin by defining what we are dealing with. The Great Northern Great Eastern line runs through my constituency, as well as those of many right hon. and hon. Members. Members, on its way from Peterborough to Doncaster. Self-evidently, it passes close to the homes of many of my constituents.

The line has, of course, been in daily use for a long time and those who move next to railways lines know—it is not unreasonable—that some noise and vibration can be generated and is expected. However, decisions about where people live and where their homes should be are based on existing use, and what is at issue here is the increase in frequency and speed of traffic along the line following Network Rail’s recent upgrade and the measures that should be taken to ameliorate the effects of that, which is something that to date Network Rail has been intransigent on with regards to both measures to deal with increased noise and vibration and compensation for those affected.

The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), formally opened the upgraded line in March last year. That huge project was a substantial investment in the infrastructure of Lincolnshire and the east midlands. Network Rail apparently spent £280 million on improving the line, including the upgrading of 61 level crossings and 57 bridges and the renewing of more than 80 miles of track to increase line speed to 75 mph for passenger trains and 60 mph for freight trains.

New electronic modular signalling systems mean that the line can be kept open 24 hours a day, which is obviously a problem for residents given that that was not previously the case. Moreover, the upgrade has increased the number of freight trains as part of plans to free up slots for more passenger trains on the east coast main line route between Peterborough and Doncaster.

Everyone appreciates the need for investment in our railways and I understand the benefits of the upgrade: better and faster services, reduction in the need for heavy maintenance over the next decade and a decrease in delays owing to infrastructure faults. Moving freight traffic on our railways also reduces the number of polluting heavy goods vehicles, which helps us all with congestion and is a welcome move for anyone who has been stuck behind a goods lorry on a Lincolnshire A road, as I all too frequently am.

However—here is the thing—since the upgraded line came into full use, serious problems have become apparent that Network Rail is at present failing to address. In particular the Minister should be aware that, as a result of the upgrade, my constituents and those of other right hon. and hon. Members who live beside the line are now subjected to a level of traffic that they never could have reasonably anticipated when they moved into their homes. These trains—both passenger and freight—are now more frequent, faster and heavier than before. There are more trains during the evening, night and early morning. As one of my constituents, Mr Scrutton, pointed out to me in an email late last night, Network Rail told those who live along the line that the use of continuous rail would improve noise disruption, but the experience of those who actually live along the line is different. Noise and vibration have got worse and, of course, far more frequent.

Those issues were first drawn to my attention some time ago by the Surfleet and Joiner families who live in the beautiful village of Helpsham and who are watching this debate keenly. They are neighbours and their properties both lie alongside the line. They have been subjected to increased noise and vibration from the upgrade and they have been assiduous in trying to find an amicable solution with Network Rail to the concerns they have expressed.

Over recent months, I have also been contacted by more and more constituents from Helpsham and from other affected villages who tell me of sleepless nights, structural damage to their homes and an inability to sell their properties. One mother wrote to tell me that her young daughter now cannot sleep through the night, which is affecting her school work. However beneficial to the nation’s infrastructure the upgrade is, it should not, I venture to suggest, have come at the cost that it has to those families, with few or no ameliorative measures put in place. The parish council in another village, Metheringham, one of the worst affected, held a public meeting last year. Residents expressed serious concern about the noise and speed of the trains along the line, and the council pleaded with Network Rail at least to reduce the speed of trains as they go through the village, all to no avail.

I have to tell the Minister that we have come up against the same point again and again. In renewing the track, Network Rail has used continuous welded rail, which it says reduces the noise and vibration and lessens the old clickety-clack noise that could be so infuriating to residents. That is cold or no comfort, because even if it is correct, it simply does not address the additional noise, vibration and nuisance that result from more trains, faster trains and heavier trains.

To show the House just how arrogant the unaccountable Network Rail is, I can do no better than offer its own words to one of my local newspapers last year:

“The line was already in daily use for both passenger and freight rail services and there is therefore no automatic obligation to introduce noise or particulate mitigation measures for increases in service levels.”

That not only displays the attitude that I have faced in trying to raise this issue but neatly summarises the problem: there is seemingly no obligation for Network Rail to mitigate those problems or to deal with me or local residents. If it were a new line or if the line had been substantially changed, there would have been such
an obligation and residents would have been able either to claim compensation or to get noise mitigation measures installed to improve their individual circumstances. However, we are repeatedly told that in this situation there is no such obligation, so nothing is being done. “Deal with it and get lost” is the clear message that I am receiving.

I well appreciate that Network Rail cannot provide compensation to everyone who lives alongside a railway line, but its response when I have raised individual cases has been that residents can apply for compensation on an individual basis, but the burden of proof falls on them to show that they are suffering from increased noise and vibration. Network Rail seems to think that everyone affected should have to pay for noise monitoring, structural surveys and so on, which are frankly beyond the means of most of those people. Worse still, even if they are successful in claiming compensation, those costs are not covered or taken into account. Although I am not asking Network Rail to pay for a survey every time someone comes along with a complaint, it is surely right, given the volume of people who were misled into thinking that the upgrade would actually improve their lives, that Network Rail should take up the burden and either pay compensation or take steps to improve the lives of those people.

The Minister will know that I have raised this issue in the House before with the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes, who has responsibility for this area, and she has met me to discuss it. She kindly promised to write to Network Rail to encourage it to engage with me and the problems and to do what it can. I have yet to see a copy of that letter, but perhaps he will in due course tell me and the whole House the current state of play.

In truth, despite their welcome sympathy for my constituents, I suspect that the Department and the Government have not yet given this issue the focus it demands in their dealings with Network Rail, which seems unaccountable to Members of Parliament and Ministers without some sort of adverse publicity, which I hope this short debate will provoke. We can push, we can plead and we can shame, all of which I have sought to do, but in the end it simply seems that none of us can push past the brick wall and make Network Rail address problems if it does not want to.

Colleagues across the House will know how difficult it can be to engage with Network Rail on difficult issues, but the problems that I have experienced in communicating with it pale in comparison with those faced by members of the public, parish councils and others. I would like to hear from the Minister about what more he can do to improve the responsiveness and accountability of Network Rail on this issue. I appreciate that he may say that his power and that of the Department to intervene in this case is limited, but I would say that is precisely the problem. It is a problem that needs to be addressed and one that I intend to keep pressing on behalf of all my affected constituents. It simply must be dealt with.

1.39 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykelham (Stephen Phillips) on securing this debate. In passing, I also commend his courageous stance on child refugees. He made a powerful statement on behalf of his constituents today, and I look forward to the Minister’s response to the important points raised in relation to Network Rail and compensation for local residents.

The Opposition support investment in rail freight. There can be no doubt about its economic and environmental benefits. More than £30 billion-worth of goods a year are carried by freight, generating £1.6 billion for the wider economy. Each freight movement produces 76% less carbon dioxide than the equivalent lorry journeys would produce. I should mention briefly that the loss of coal and steel traffic is a matter of deep concern in the industry, and should be in this House too, especially as the trade in biomass has not met expectations due to the policy decisions made by different Departments.

We can support freight by investing in dedicated infrastructure and upgrading existing routes to free up space on our main lines. Such was the intention behind the Great Northern Great Eastern joint line. I am proud that in government, Labour spearheaded the development of the strategic freight network. It is welcome that some investment has been made in freight, although it is worrying that other projects, such as freight electrification schemes, have dropped by the wayside. However, we must take proper account of the impact that such projects have on local communities. I am sure that all hon. Members sympathise with the position of the hon. and learned Gentleman’s constituents.

Many areas of the country are not well served by rail, and Lincolnshire’s passenger services are certainly inadequate. It is famously home to the Brigg line, which I am told operates passenger services only on Saturdays. Rail funding in the east midlands is proportionately the lowest in the country at just £34 per head, down from £45 per head in 2010. In other words, investment in the region has fallen by a quarter, while fares have risen by the same percentage. It is no wonder that residents and passengers feel aggrieved when they face increases in noise, and yet passenger services are not up to scratch.

In the last 24 hours, freight trains were scheduled to run along the line in question at least once an hour between midnight and 6 o’clock this morning. We have heard today from the hon. and learned Gentleman about the impact of those movements on local residents. He told us that Network Rail was not offering local residents compensation, but compensation is partly a matter for the courts if material loss can be demonstrated—an issue that I know is top of the Minister’s to-do list in relation to diesel emissions. I am sure we all hope it will not come to that.

I would like to make a few points in relation to Network Rail’s position. Network Rail’s actions have perhaps been referred to in isolation so far, but its spending plans for 2014 to 2019 are just part of a plan specified and approved by Ministers in the Department for Transport. Indeed, the completion of the joint line upgrade is commemorated by a ministerial plaque at Ruslington station. The financial consequences of decisions taken in 2012 are well known, after the costs of some projects escalated, and I will return to that.

It is worth emphasising that in September 2014, Network Rail became a full subsidiary of the Department for Transport and is now directly accountable to Ministers in a way that was not previously the case. Conversely,
Ministers are also directly accountable in this place for the actions of Network Rail. The Secretary of State has a personal representative on the company’s board, in the form of the Department’s special director. With the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry) chairing the monthly meeting of the Department’s performance delivery group, which brings together Network Rail and train operators, there is no shortage of channels for Ministers to make their opinions known. The Minister present may reasonably say that it is not his or his colleagues’ place to interfere in operational matters, but they can speak about Network Rail’s corporate policies, and I hope he will do so today.

It is clear that the issues raised by the hon. and learned Gentleman could affect the constituency of any Member with a railway line in their patch. I am sure we all want assurance that if our constituents were to raise reasonable requests for compensation or mitigation, Network Rail would give them a fair hearing. When this issue was previously raised, a spokesperson for the company said:

“I do appreciate the concerns of local residents but Network Rail is not funded to offer any form of compensation for carrying out our statutory obligations in maintaining or enhancing the railway.”

Something important might have been said there. We know that Network Rail is facing a serious budget shortfall. Essential projects have been delayed by up to four years in relation to the electrification of the midland main-line and the trans-pennine route, which were euphemistically paused last June and then mysteriously un-paused a week before the Conservative party conference.

The cost of the great western main line electrification programme has increased from an estimated £548 million in 2011 to £2.8 billion last year. As a result, the company is selling £1.8 billion-worth of assets, including some of our best-known stations, and assuming an extra £700 million of borrowing. Maintenance works are being pushed back, which, according to the regulator, has contributed to the 65% increase in temporary speed restrictions on the national rail network over the past year.

There is a certain irony in the fact that freight sites that were acquired by Network Rail at a cost of £220 million just two years ago are now back on the market as part of the wider fire sale, at a potential loss to the taxpayer. We need clarity. Is Network Rail unable to offer compensation for fund mitigation measures because of some point of legal principle, or is the more prosaic explanation that the company simply cannot afford it? If that is the case, I hope the Minister will enlighten the House, because it is clear that there is more to come into the public domain in relation to Network Rail’s financial position.

The hon. and learned Gentleman has raised an important issue that is clearly of acute interest to his constituents who live adjacent to the line. While we want to see more freight on the rail network, his description of Network Rail’s interactions with the local community gives cause for concern, and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to those points when he sums up.

1.45 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips) for securing this debate on the upgrade of the Great Northern Great Eastern railway line and the impact on the residents of his constituency and beyond.

I will first say a few words about why the Government have chosen to invest in our rail network. We are undertaking the biggest transport infrastructure project in Britain since the coming of the motorways, because we have chosen to invest for the future. We are making journeys simpler, better, faster and more reliable, and we are making transport safer and more sustainable. The investment we are making today will help prepare our country for tomorrow. Our plan will support jobs, enable business growth and bring the distant parts of our country closer together. We are supporting a record £70 billion investment in rail, roads, ports and airports. For our railways, we are undertaking the biggest rail modernisation project since Victorian times.

Building world-class infrastructure is vital if we are to build a stronger economy. We are ensuring that every part of Britain benefits from the growing economy and that everyone who works hard gets the opportunities they need to succeed. That includes, for example, High Speed 2, which will connect London Euston to Birmingham, Leeds and Scotland, as well as new, British-built intercity express trains for the east coast and great western rail routes and the electrification of the midland main line. Indeed, on Monday, I will be in Doncaster to mark the start of the building of the H52 college, which will ensure that we have the skills to deliver such projects.

Rail passengers today are already seeing the fruits of our labour following the renovation of many of our busiest stations, including Manchester Victoria, Birmingham New Street, and the landmark stations at King’s Cross and St Pancras International. We have truly entered a new age of the railway, which will leave a lasting legacy for future generations. Our railway and its supply chain contribute up to £9.3 billion in gross value added per year. It employs 212,000 people and provides tax receipts of up to £3.9 billion. The sector is succeeding in winning custom and investment on a level that was unthinkable just a few decades ago.

The strategic purpose of the GNGE upgrade was to provide high-quality freight paths between Peterborough and Doncaster, via Lincoln, on a 24/7 basis. Modal shift of freight from road to rail is good for the country. Rail presents a faster, greener, safer and more efficient way to transport loads across Britain. It has been said that for every freight train operated, 60 lorries are removed from the road network—or lorrys that thunder past people’s homes. The upgrade will allow for up two freight trains an hour to be diverted away from the east coast main line, thus freeing up capacity for more long-distance passenger services, which will be needed when the new intercity express trains start operating on that route.

The upgrade complements other vital work that is helping to unlock major bottlenecks at York, London King’s Cross, Peterborough, Nottingham, Hitchin and North Doncaster. For example, passengers from Cambridge no longer have to cross the east coast main line, increasing the reliability of that route and making journeys better. The significant upgrade between Peterborough and Doncaster via Spalding and Lincoln was one element of a wider package of work to improve the region’s railways.

Another strategic objective of the upgrade was to improve safety and to make the railway more sustainable.
It now delivers significant operational cost savings through the abolition of 16 manned signal boxes, estimated at £1 million per annum. It has allowed for the replacement of 26 level crossings, as well as lower maintenance costs through the replacement of old jointed rails with continuous welded track, which is designed to reduce noise and vibration for neighbours, while dramatically extending the major maintenance intervention period to 15 years. In fact, comparative analysis between continuous-welded and older jointed track indicates that noise and vibration are reduced by up to 60% as a result of re-railing.

Across the country, Network Rail is developing a range of techniques to reduce rail noise. They include rail grinding, which provides a smoother contact surface, leading to less noise when trains run over it; noise barriers along the side of the track; track dampers fitted to the rails to reduce vibration and noise when trains run over them; and composite brake blocks, which reduce noise significantly compared with previous cast iron ones. The vast majority of the UK rolling stock fleet now has these fitted.

Since completion of the upgrade on the GNGE route, freight traffic has increased as services have been diverted from the busy east coast main line. This obviously represents a change in usage of the line, which previously had a limited day time passenger service. I am aware that there was extensive consultation about this upgrade, including numerous community exhibitions, drop-in sessions, public meetings and presentations to parish councils. Network Rail also held a comprehensive schools engagement programme to help to raise awareness about safety matters associated with the railway.

My hon. and learned Friend will be delighted to hear that the work to specify the next east midlands franchise is under way. We will be seeking views from stakeholders and passengers later in the year about what they would like from the new franchise, including the GNGE route.

Turning to the specific matter of compensation, I thank my hon. and learned Friend for continuing to raise the issue, which I know is important to him and his constituents. I will liaise with the Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), to address the points he made, particularly the correspondence he referred to.

Passengers are at the heart of what we do in the Department, and the Rail Minister has written to Network Rail to encourage it to take an active interest in noise and vibration on the GNGE line and look into conducting studies of any increase in them caused by extra freight traffic.

Stephen Phillips: I am extremely grateful to the Minister and to the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who speaks for the Opposition, for contributing to the debate.

The problem that has not been grappled with is twofold. Yes, the Minister says that extensive consultation took place before the upgrade of the line and that there was a programme with schools, but the difficulty, as adverted to in the email that my constituent Mr Scrutton sent me overnight, is that the case presented to local residents, parish councils and everyone else was that the upgrade, with the continuous welding of the track to which my hon. Friend refers, would improve their lives by reducing the noise and vibration to which they were exposed. That might well be the case, and the figure of 60% that he gives for the reduction in noise and vibration from using continuously welded track might well be right, but it is only right if the frequency, speed and weight of the trains are the same, and that has not been the case.

The track, signalling and infrastructure have been improved, but as a consequence, the line is used more frequently, including, as the Minister accepts, through the night, and it is used by trains that are heavier, faster and more frequent. The result is that the case that Network Rail presented during the consultation period, to which he adverts, does not represent the reality to which my constituents and those of other right hon. and hon. Members, who unfortunately are unable to join us today, are subjected. That is the issue with which Network Rail needs to grapple. I am talking about whether it can offer compensation and whether funding should have been put in place, when the project was announced, to ameliorate the fact that the trains are causing real concerns to those who live along the line and are affecting not only their property values but, much more important, their quality of life. That is what needs to be addressed. My hon. Friend says that he will talk to the Minister with responsibility in this area; I hope that that is the message that he will take back.
EU Immigration

3 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered immigration from the EU.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) for attending; this is a bigger audience than I normally get, and I will do my best to cope with it. EU immigration is a very important issue for my constituents, so I am most grateful to Mr Speaker and the Chairman of Ways and Means for granting me permission to hold this debate. I am sure that its timing is appreciated by everyone present this afternoon.

Immigration is an important issue for my constituents—it is the number one issue on the doorstep. It is now, in the run-up to the EU referendum on 23 June, but it has been for many years. Simply put, the problem is that the number of people coming into our country, both from outside the European Union and from inside it, is simply too great for our country or indeed my constituency to cope with.

Hon. Members will recall that when we joined the European Union on 1 January 1973, immigration from the then Common Market was not an issue. We joined an association of trading partners. That was the decision taken at the time, rightly or wrongly, but the number of Common Market citizens coming to the United Kingdom was relatively small and easy for the country to cope with. Indeed, the flow of United Kingdom citizens into the Common Market area was also small. But we are now in a different world, in which our membership of what was then the Common Market morphed into the European Community and now the European Union—if we stay in, no doubt, it will become the United States of Europe. Immigration is happening on a simply unprecedented scale and we are not able to cope with the numbers coming to our shores from the European Union. That is a big problem, because we have absolutely no control over it.

Immigration has been a big issue for some time, but my attention was drawn to the scale of the problem when it was revealed just a few weeks ago that, although official figures from the Home Office state that 257,000 EU migrants arrived in our country last year, 630,000 EU citizens were issued with British national insurance numbers over the same period. My alarm at the scale of the problem we are facing is far bigger than we had estimated.

Migration Watch, which is the respected body of choice for the independent analysis of migration figures, has done a report comparing the migration figures with population estimates for migrants born in the group of eastern European countries known as the A8 nations—the nations that joined the European Union in 2004. The report shows that between 2010 and 2015, the population born in the A8 countries and living in the UK increased by an average of 90,000 a year, but during the same period estimated net migration and the official statistics from the A8 countries averaged only 40,000. That is a difference of more than 50,000 a year. The chairman of Migration Watch UK, the respected Lord Green of Deddington, said:

“This analysis casts serious doubt on the accuracy of our immigration figures.”

The row over the numbers has been stirred by the fact that Her Majesty’s Government refused freedom of information requests at the end of last year that would have clarified the situation. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that some 919,000 EU migrants have arrived in Britain since June 2010, but in that same time—over the past six years—some 2.2 million national insurance numbers have been issued to EU migrants. That official figure, 919,000, is worth dwelling on for a moment. The spokesman for Her Majesty’s Opposition, the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), might like to note that when the Labour party was in government and the A8 countries were admitted to the European Union, we were reliably told by the Minister at the time that only 13,000 A8 migrants were expected to come to our shores. We are now approaching 1 million and counting.

The gap in the numbers is extremely disturbing. I understand that, having resisted for several months, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs agreed in April to pass information to the Office for National Statistics to examine whether the numbers might be reconciled, and that the Office for National Statistics is now processing the information and plans to release a reconciliation on 26 May. Will the Minister confirm whether that is his understanding of the process and that we can expect the reconciliation numbers to be published on 26 May? It is important that the numbers are released before the referendum on 23 June; otherwise, the British people might make the decision on our ongoing membership of the European Union without all the requisite information.

Of the national insurance numbers issued, I understand that some 209,000 were given to Romanians and Bulgarians, yet officially only 55,000 Romanians and Bulgarians settled here last year. Those numbers are extremely worrying for my constituents and for the country. We may now have reached a total of some 450,000 Romanian and Bulgarian nationals living in the United Kingdom. When we debated the number of Romanians and Bulgarians expected to come to this country after their countries’ accession, we were told that projections of half a million people coming from those two countries were simply fanciful and scaremongering and that we should know better. We have had debating in this very Chamber in which those dangers were highlighted.
Prime Minister told the Liaison Committee: I have become alarmed. Yesterday, perhaps anticipating on behalf of my constituents in Kettering, the more European Union. The more I have researched this subject further talk about the future admission of Turkey to the European Union. The Prime Minister has concluded were added to by the inadequacy of the supposed renegotiation that count the number of people coming here and about the dodgy statistics being used by the Government to poorer countries within the European Union. Increasingly, even more than greater magnet for workers to come here from other European Union countries. Were Turkey to join, the concerns we have now about the present level of immigration to this country from the European Union would be double that once the true figures are revealed from accession A8 eastern European countries. Were Turkey to join the European Union, 4,000 Turkish people in Kettering. I know several, some of whom live in Kettering and are diligent, family people. The problem is not their ethnicity, or their language or their culture; it is the number that could come to our shores. Mr Hollobone: I would like to know the answer to that question as well. I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for posing it. Perhaps the Minister will clarify when he responds at the end of the debate, because my hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. We have had an attempt to reform how Britain’s membership of the European Union works. The Prime Minister has concluded some form of minor renegotiation of our terms of membership, which, surprisingly and increasingly, members of the Government do not seem to talk much about, but apparently this reform has given us special status in the EU, despite the fact that in the official communiqué about the supposed renegotiation, the term “special status” is nowhere mentioned. It is my contention that the proposed minor reforms to benefit entitlements for EU migrants will not slow the intake of EU migrants to our shores at all. A report this week says that only 6% of such migrants would be affected by the proposals, and I would suggest that the very welcome increase in the national minimum wage and the new national living wage will act as a far greater magnet for workers to come here from other European Union countries. Increasingly, even more than now, the United Kingdom will be seen to be the land of milk and honey with not only the strongest growth rate in the European Union, but now a national living wage well above what many could hope to earn in their own poorer countries within the European Union. My concerns on behalf of my constituents about the dodgy statistics being used by the Government to count the number of people coming here and about the inadequacy of the supposed renegotiation that the Prime Minister has concluded were added to by further talk about the future admission of Turkey to the European Union. The more I have researched this subject on behalf of my constituents in Kettering, the more alarmed I have become. Yesterday, perhaps anticipating remarks that might be made during this debate, the Prime Minister told the Liaison Committee: “I would say very clearly to people, if your vote in this referendum is being influenced by considerations about Turkish membership of the EU, don’t think about it. It’s not an issue in this referendum and it shouldn’t be.”

He went on to say that it would not happen for “decades”. I contend that that is simply not the case. Indeed, it is official Government policy to encourage Turkish membership and accession to the European Union. Were Turkey ever to join, the concerns we have now about the present level of immigration to this country from the European Union would be magnified several times over. Perhaps I can give the House some figures that demonstrate the scale of the potential challenge we face.

The A8 countries that joined in 2004 comprise Poland, with 38.5 million people; the Czech Republic, with 10.5 million; Hungary, 10 million; Slovakia, 5.5 million; Lithuania, 3 million; Slovenia and Latvia, with 2 million each; and Estonia, with 1.3 million. Mr Pritchard, you are probably the only person in this room to have visited all those countries, given your reputation for wanting to see international issues at first hand. I know that your reputation precedes you in many of those nations. If we add up all the A8 countries, the figure comes to 72.8 million people. That is the number of people who joined the European Union when the A8 countries joined in 2004.

There are 75 million people in Turkey. The figure is slightly smaller than Germany’s population of 80 million and bigger than the populations of France with 66 million, ourselves with 65 million, and Italy with 61 million. In addition, Turkey would be the poorest member of the European Union. Its GDP per capita is $9,500 per year compared with Poland’s—the biggest of the A8 countries—$13,400 per year and our $43,800 per year. Those 75 million Turkish people are more numerous than us and poorer than us. Most of them are Muslim and they have a different culture. Were those people to emigrate to our shores at the same rate as people from the A8 countries have done, it would transform communities in this country up and down the land, yet it is the official policy of Her Majesty’s Government to actively encourage Turkey to join the European Union.

In Kettering, there are 74,000 registered electors; 4,000 of them are EU citizens, most of whom come from the A8 accession countries. Were Turkey to join the European Union—given that it is poorer than any of the A8 and more numerous than all the A8 combined—we can expect, within five to 10 years of Turkish accession, 4,000 Turkish people in Kettering. I am sure you know many Turkish people, Mr Pritchard; I know several, some of whom live in Kettering and are a great asset to the local community. They are hard-working, diligent, family people. The problem is not their ethnicity, their language or their culture; it is the number that could come to our shores.

If a little borough such as Kettering can expect to have 4,000 Turkish people in short order, imagine what would happen in some of our larger towns and cities. There would be an influx with which we would simply not be able to cope. We are finding it difficult to absorb 1 million migrants—that is the official statistic. It could be double that once the true figures are revealed from the accession A8 eastern European countries. Were we
to get immigration on a similar scale from Turkey, this country would be transformed and, I would suggest, not for the better.

London is currently the biggest city in the European Union, with 8.5 million people. Istanbul has 14 million people, and only 3% of Turkey is actually in Europe. Turkey’s accession would extend the borders of the European Union to the borders of Syria, Iraq and Iran, and we know that Turkey’s borders are not secure, which is one of the reasons why we have the troubles that we do with ISIS in Syria. Imagine if Frontex, the EU border force, were put in charge of the Turkish border with Syria, Iraq and Iran. I suggest that there is simply no way that Britain’s future would be safer and more secure as a member of a European Union with such external frontiers.

The Prime Minister said in his remarks to the Liaison Committee that he did not expect Turkish accession for decades, yet Her Majesty’s Government are providing millions of pounds to Turkey to help it to prepare for entry to the European Union. Other accession countries are also in the queue: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia; and the EU has agreed to an instrument for pre-accession assistance to pay money to those countries to facilitate their becoming EU nation states. The UK’s share of that money is £1.2 billion between 2014 and 2020, which is a rate of £170 million each year. That annual sum is the equivalent of half the NHS cancer drugs fund managed by NHS England. It would pay for child benefit for 157,000 children. It would pay for 27,000 state pensions. I know that this will interest my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis): it would treble the UK Government’s dedicated pothole action fund. Those are very large sums of money, which we are giving to the accession states, yet the Prime Minister tells us that accession will not happen for decades. Well, both sides of the argument cannot be right. Either Turkey is not going to join—in which case, why are we spending all this money?—or it is going to, in which case the British people are not being told the whole truth.

We are giving each year for this fund £9 million to Albania, yet Albania has some of the nastiest criminals in the whole European Union. I am afraid that, along with lots of immigrants from the EU to this country, we are also importing a wave of crime. There are 472 Albanian nationals currently serving time at Her Majesty’s pleasure in our prisons. Albania is in fifth place in the list of countries that have exported their criminals to this country. Albania, with 472 people in our jails, has a population of 3 million. Poland has a population of 38 million, and there are 951 Polish nationals in our prisons. Albania in particular has a problem with organised crime, and it has come, and is coming, our way. Albanian mafia gangs are believed to be largely behind sex trafficking and immigrant smuggling, as well as working with Turkish gangs that control the heroin trade in the United Kingdom. I am sure that the Minister will want to help the House by giving us more details about the extent to which crime from Turkey and Albania is already on the streets of London.

Vice squad officers estimate that Albanians now control more than 75% of this country’s brothels and that their operations in London’s Soho alone are worth more than £15 million a year. They are said to be present in every big city in Britain, after fighting off rival criminals in turf wars. Hon. Members will know from the number of Romanians and Bulgarians in our prisons and the number of arrests made of Romanians and Bulgarians that we have already imported a wave of crime from EU-entrant countries. I and my constituents are worried about that wave of crime being magnified with new entrant countries if they include Albania and Turkey.

We are giving £2 billion to the accession countries to encourage them to join the European Union. On top of that financial assistance, which would be better spent on health services in our constituencies, we now have a visa-free area all the way from Calais to the Syrian border, because the EU Commission in its wisdom has proposed visa-free access for 75 million Turkish citizens, to the Schengen area. That is part of a co-ordinated, accelerated move towards Turkish accession to the European Union. The Commission has also proposed visa-free access for Kosovo. The problem with Schengen is that, although it makes it easy for people to travel across the Schengen area without having to show their passports, criminals can now pass from the Syrian border to the French coast at Calais without being intercepted. Ronald Noble, the former Secretary General of Interpol, has said that the Schengen system “is effectively an international passport-free zone for terrorists to execute attacks on the Continent and make their escape...Leading up to these latest attacks, none of those countries systematically screened passports or verified the identities of those crossing borders by land or at sea ports or airports. This is like hanging a sign welcoming terrorists to Europe. And they have been accepting the invitation”.

With the wave of immigration, we now have visa-free travel for citizens of non-EU-member states across the Schengen area, all the way to the English channel. I suggest that that endangers our security.

The Lord Chancellor, who is a wise man and who has been ahead of the curve on the issue, has said that the wave of immigration hitting our shores, which is set to get worse if we stay in the European Union, is a direct and serious threat to public services in the United Kingdom. To give one example, GP registrations have increased in this country by 1.5 million in the past three years alone.

It is commonly assumed that the crisis in our accident and emergency departments is caused by new migrants not actually registering with their GPs at all, but going straight to A&E whenever something goes wrong, thus clogging up the system for everyone else. That is just one example of the pressure on our public services. Another would be schools. It is not now uncommon for primary schools to have lots of children whose first language is not English. That puts a great strain not only on the number of school places but on the resources that schools must find to provide the requisite education for our youngsters.

Not only has the EU bent rules to create a visa-free zone from Syria to the English channel, but I contend that many of the people in that zone will end up as migrants to these shores in the fullness of time. It is all very well for the Germans to grant asylum to 1 million Syrians, but in five years’ time those 1 million Syrians will be able to get EU passports and to come to this country, with London in particular acting as a magnet. While we remain in the European Union we have no control on the numbers coming to our shores.
Frontex, the seriously discredited EU border force, which is clearly struggling to maintain the security of Europe’s borders, has said that the expansion of the visa-free area will increase the pressure on our borders. A recent Frontex report noted:

“The number of persons aiming to get to the UK with fraudulent documents significantly increased (+70%) compared to 2014. This trend is mostly attributable to the increasing number of Albanian nationals often misusing Italian and Greek ID cards followed by Ukrainian nationals abusing authentic Polish ID cards”.

There we have it. Members do not have to believe me: Frontex, the EU’s border force, says that there has been a 70% increase in the number of people using false documentation to try to get into the United Kingdom.

Mr Andrew Turner: Will my hon. Friend repeat what he just said about the ability of people with no UK passport to come into this country because they have a German passport, which they can become a holder of very quickly?

Mr Hollobone: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that issue. Many other EU countries do not have the rigorous rules on the issuance of passports that we have. For example, in Romania, there are lots of Moldovans. Moldova is not in the European Union; it is next door to Romania and used to be part of Romania, but it is no longer. Lots of Moldovans qualify for EU passports because they are the grandparents of Romanian citizens. They are not EU citizens, but with their EU passport they are able to waltz into the United Kingdom and we are unable to do anything about it. Were we a free, independent and sovereign nation once again, we could say, “No, you’re not allowed into this country,” because we could set new rules. While we are a member of the European Union and the European Court oversees our border policy, we do not have that right.

The migration crisis is already having an impact on the forces that we have at our disposal to control our borders. The UK Border Force runs five seaborne cutters to protect Britain’s shores from immigration from the European Union. At any one time, one is under repair, which leaves four others. Two have been sent to help out with the migration crisis between Greece and Turkey, which leaves just two to patrol Britain’s territorial waters. Members will be as shocked as I am to learn that official Home Office statistics show that 67,500 small planes and boats enter Britain each year unchecked. At least, that is what the Home Office tells us. That is an alarming number of incursions into British airspace and British territorial waters. Reducing the number of seaborne cutters available to intercept such vessels clearly weakens our borders.

This week, the situation relating to our borders and to people coming to this country from the EU was made even worse by new European Union rules on the Dublin regulations. The Dublin regulations say that, if a person claims asylum in an EU nation state and then goes to another EU nation state, the second country can send them back to the first. That is the way the system is meant to work, except that it does not work with Greece, because its system is meant to be so badly run that sending an individual back to that country after they have been intercepted here breaches their human rights. That is despite the fact that tens of thousands of our citizens go to Greece on holiday every year.

Under the Dublin regulations, we have been sending back only 1% of the asylum seekers who reach our shores. That is pretty pathetic, but the European Commission is now changing the regulations and will give us no guarantee that Britain will be able to maintain even the current regulations should we decide to stay in the European Union. I seek further clarification from the Minister on that point, because my constituents are concerned not only about the volume of legal immigration to this country, but about people abusing the asylum system to come to our shores.

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): As I said on the Floor of the House yesterday, the Commission has said that the UK would be able to maintain the Dublin regulations as they currently exist should we decide not to opt in to the new proposals. It is important to make that point clear.

Mr Hollobone: The Minister places more reliance on the European Commission’s word than my constituents and I do. There is nothing to stop it changing its mind once we have voted to stay in the European Union. Indeed, in the draft proposals, it threatened the United Kingdom with financial consequences should we not co-operate with its decision. Although I take careful note of what the Minister says, I am afraid I do not have as much faith as he has in what the Commission tells us.

James Brokenshire: On that point, my hon. Friend has highlighted the issues relating to the new regulation, but, as he knows, the UK has an opt-out: we have to positively opt in to new measures with a justice and home affairs base, of which this is one. Therefore, the UK has that protection, which goes much further than anything the Commission says.

Mr Hollobone: Again, although I admire the Minister’s confidence that what the European Union tells us will in fact be the case, I simply do not trust it, because it has gone back on things before and I expect it will again. The reason why I think it will go back on its word is that the asylum problem in the European Union is out of control. The EU has decided that it is simply not possible for the existing Dublin regulations to work effectively. Now it wants a quota of people from non-EU countries who come to Europe claiming asylum to be allocated to other member states. My great fear is that, if we vote to stay in the European Union, we will be lumbered with some of those asylum seekers, especially because we would remain under the control of the European Court, which would ultimately decide what our asylum policy should be. If we decide to leave the European Union, we will be able to decide our asylum policy for ourselves. I am sure it would be free and fair, but it would not be the free-for-all that we have at the moment.

The consequence of all this immigration from the EU, in whatever form it takes, is that we are losing control of our country. I asked the Transport Secretary for his transport projections, and I was given three sets of figures. The road traffic forecast for England suggests that traffic will increase between 4% and 20% by 2020,
between 11% and 38% by 2030; and between 15% and 52% by 2040—that is before Turkey joins the European Union. Can hon. Members imagine 50% more vehicles on our roads by 2040? Those are not my figures, but Her Majesty’s Government’s official estimates of what is happening to roads in every constituency in our country.

Increasingly—I am sure we all have constituents who have had this experience—job vacancies require people to speak Polish, Romanian, Bulgarian or even Russian. A recent report showed that dozens of vacancies on a Government-backed recruitment site called Universal Jobmatch stressed that it is important for people working in certain occupations, such as painting or decorating, to be able to converse in Polish. That is discrimination against our own people, and we all know it is happening in every constituency in this country. It is absurd to expect someone who was born and brought up in this country to speak one of those eastern European languages to secure a fairly menial job.

The pressure of all this immigration from the EU has caused the population of this country to rise to seriously unsustainable levels. As the chairmen of the cross-party group on balanced migration highlighted, official Government projections show that our population will grow by nearly 10 million in the next 25 years to more than 74 million people. Currently, we are at 64 million; they expect that to go up to 74 million.

If all immigration from the EU and elsewhere were to end tomorrow and were reduced to zero, the UK population would rise from 64 million today to almost 68 million by 2039, official Government statistics estimate. If we were to have net migration of just over 100,000 a year—just outside the commitment in the Conservative manifesto, on which you, Mr Pritchard, the Minister, the Parliamentary Private Secretary present, my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight, Mr Andrew Turner, and I for one want to rejoin my team in Holborn and St Pancras as soon as possible to play my part until the polls close at 10 pm.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): I was going to limit myself to intervening on my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), but I want to make a couple of points as well. I read in the analysis by Her Majesty’s Treasury about the long-term economic impact of EU membership and the alternatives. On page 136, it states:

“In the principal projection, total net international migration to the UK falls from 329,000 per year in 2014 towards 185,000 per year from 2021 onwards.”

What did the Treasury mean by that quote? It went on to state:

“This is a stylised projection rather than a forecast.”

That tells me nothing. Perhaps you can explain that better than I can, Mr Pritchard, but if so we will have to converse about it later.

My staff and I have worked out that “stylised” must mean that the projection is artificial, mainly because it does not consider alternatives and is filled with uncertainties. The Treasury has considered no potential models in case of Brexit other than the two already available alternatives—for both we would have to accept free movement of people—and nor has it considered uncertainties such as future Government policies on immigration and student fees.

What did the Chancellor of the Exchequer say about that? He said that calculations based on the Treasury’s projection mean that there will be 3 million more immigrants in this country, at a minimum, by 2030. He has made his position clear: through the renegotiations, he has received more powers for the country to deal with net migration; and we will have to accept free movement of people if we want access to the single market. I am very concerned about that. The Chancellor may have said that we are the people who want free movement, but that is something that I do not want. I especially do not want limitations on immigration from outside Europe and yet free movement within Europe.

The Treasury could have created potential Brexit models that do not include the Swiss or Norwegian alternatives. Two such potential models are a restrictive migration policy and a very liberal policy—both could have been offered, but neither of them were. The reason is that the Treasury wanted to use the analysis for political reasons, not for explaining anything. That was the policy of the Chancellor and, indeed, of the Prime Minister.

The 100,000 net migration pledge in the Conservative manifesto includes immigration from both EU and non-EU countries, but many more people have come to Britain from the EU than originally anticipated. In 2010, the Prime Minister pledged to reduce net migration into Britain to below 100,000—“no ifs, no buts”. He claimed that that was a promise, although it has been watered down to a mere ambition. Why was the target re-included in the 2015 manifesto if it was already known that he could not keep it and we as a nation could not keep it, and why did the Chancellor agree to it?

3.46 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I will be very brief. There are important elections going on today and I for one want to rejoin my team in Holborn and St Pancras as soon as possible to play my part until the polls close at 10 pm.

I recognise the importance of the issue we are debating; it is important to the country and to the EU referendum debate. However, people could be forgiven in recent
days for thinking that this is the only debate that those who want to leave the EU want to have about Europe—even on a day when people in all four countries in the UK are going to the polls. I and the Labour party strongly support remaining in the EU and being at the heart of reforming it, not leaving it. Remaining in the EU is better for British jobs, for security and for our economy. It also equips us better to tackle complex cross-border issues such as the environment and global terrorism.

There are clear benefits to free movement and migration. There is the economic case: the ease of access to the world’s largest market. There is the cultural and social case: migration has benefited the UK and made it a more diverse and confident country. It has helped to build our public services—for example, the national health service is reliant on migration—as well as businesses and universities. To take an example, one in five carers looking after our growing elderly population has come to Britain from the EU and elsewhere. It works both ways: about 1.2 million British people are taking advantage of free movement to work and live in other European countries. It is also important to remember that movement is not unrestrained; there are exceptions, we have border controls and we can deport individuals within Europe.

I acknowledge, and the Labour party acknowledges, the challenges that free movement can bring. I recognise that the sharp increase in migration in certain areas can cause cultural dislocation and pressure on services. I have seen that around the country—in the north-east and the north-west, in particular—and recognise that it is a challenge that needs to be confronted. We believe strongly that the answer is not to leave the EU but to reform it, to ensure that money and services follow people much more closely, for example through regional funds, and to look at how we can tackle issues such as low pay and protecting the going rate.

We also need to look at our own policies and regulations, rather than blaming the EU for everything. For example, we should be toughening labour market enforcement—that is dealt with in the Immigration Bill, which is in the final stages of going through Parliament—stopping gangmasters and introducing new laws on fair recruitment. There are UK solutions that I believe we can and should be introducing. For those and other reasons, I support staying in and leading in Europe, not leaving it.

3.49 pm

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) on securing the debate. Although the Chamber may not be well attended—no doubt other Members are elsewhere, fighting the elections that the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) referred to—my hon. Friend highlighted important issues and I welcome the opportunity to debate migration and Britain’s place in the European Union. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) for taking part in the debate.

We remain committed to reforms across the whole of Government to create an immigration system that works in the best interests of our country and reduces net migration to levels that are sustainable for our public services and infrastructure and for communities across the UK. My hon. Friends mentioned the pressures that migration brings to public services such as the health service, housing and schools. The Government take those issues very seriously, which is why I make my points in the way that I do. We seek to reduce net migration to a sustainable level—from the hundreds of thousands to the tens of thousands—and to exercise the control that the last Labour Government did not. We have sought to make those changes through a range of reforms to both EU and non-EU migration.

During the last Parliament, we introduced reforms that have cut widespread abuse of work, student and family visas. We also cracked down on illegal working and sham marriages, and legislated to make life in the UK difficult for illegal migrants by cutting their access to goods and services such as driving licences, rental accommodation and bank accounts, and by other means. The Immigration Bill that is before the House will continue that reform. It is important to underline the steps that have been and continue to be taken in cracking down on such abuses.

Mr Hollobone: I commend the Minister and the Home Office on their efforts in tackling the abuses of the immigration system that he inherited. I dread to think what the level of immigration would be if we still had a Labour Government—they simply would not have taken the steps that he has outlined—but how will he honour our manifesto commitment to get annual net migration below 100,000?

James Brokenshire: It is important to recognise the need to continue the reforms that we have made and take further steps to crack down on the abuses from both outside and inside the EU that I have highlighted. Strengthening our ability to crack down on abuses of free movement and related issues such as sham marriage was part of the Prime Minister’s renegotiations, and we must ensure that European Court judgments are clarified so that we can take action on those issues. I will come on to address some of those broader themes.

During the last Parliament, we tightened the rules on EU nationals, demonstrating that the right to free movement is not unqualified. Since January 2014, we have made significant progress in tackling abuse. We have restricted access to a range of benefits for all those who are not economically active. Between January 2014 and December 2015, we sought the removal of more than 600,000 EU nationals who either did not have the right to be in the UK or had abused their right.

The reforms that the Prime Minister secured at the February European Council take us another step forward in our efforts to ensure that immigration to the UK is sustainable and maximises Britain’s prosperity and security. The deal is legally binding across Europe and the agreement will come into force directly after the referendum if the UK decides to stay in the EU. In the future, no British Prime Minister will be able to give away further powers to Brussels without a referendum. That is an important agreement that the Government achieved in the previous Parliament, which gives further assurance on the concerns people may have about any ceding of further powers to the EU. We have put that lock in place and provided a referendum to give further assurance.

Mr Hollobone: We have the luxury of time this afternoon, and I am listening to the Minister intently—he is reading the brief he has been given extremely well. The independent
Office for Budget Responsibility, set up by the Conservatives, has said that from 2021 onwards net migration will be 185,000 a year, even after the Prime Minister’s renegotiation and all the measures the Minister outlined. Do the Government dispute the OBR’s forecast or will we be in permanent breach of our manifesto commitment?

James Brokenshire: It is important to underline that the OBR’s numbers are a projection and not a forecast. Projections do not attempt to predict the impact of Government policy or changing economic circumstances at home or abroad. That is why I make the point about the policy changes we have made and continue to make and why we retain the focus on bringing net migration down to the sustainable levels that my hon. Friend and I recognise are important to reduce the pressures on public services.

Mr Andrew Turner: Does the Minister not realise that the Chancellor of the Exchequer said that we had to accept the prospect of 185,000 migrants a year to this country and that we could not argue about it? We cannot move the numbers.

James Brokenshire: I come back to the point I made about the OBR’s projections. Clearly, numerous factors can affect migration flows. At any given point in time, the UK’s position relative to where potential migrants come from and other places they could go will affect flows. Part of the Prime Minister’s reforms at EU level are about competitiveness. Some of the challenges we have seen in recent years have stemmed from disparities in the economic development of one European country against another. That is why the competitiveness part of his negotiations is important.

We are looking at a number of factors. In terms of the skills agenda, my hon. Friend will very much welcome the approach that the Government have taken in creating apprenticeships—some in the previous Parliament and more in this Parliament. That is giving significant opportunities to reskill and providing our young people with opportunities to meet the needs of the employment market.

We need to look at this in relation to reform of migration rules: the steps we have taken for those outside the EU and through the EU renegotiation on factors that could draw people here. However, it is also about the overall competitiveness of the EU. We need the EU market to grow and to see countries’ economies succeeding and creating jobs. There is also the skills agenda here and welfare reform more broadly, with people seeing that work always pays and taking up opportunities to work.

There are a number of factors at play, which is why the Government are looking at this from the perspective not only of Home Office migration policy but of other policy areas. That demonstrates our commitment to look at sustainability levels. We are acting across Government to reduce net migration and to establish a system that acts in the best interests of our country.

Mr Hollobone: No doubt the Minister will be promoted in due course, but if he is not and remains in post, how confident is he that by the time this Parliament concludes in 2020, net annual migration levels will be below 100,000 a year?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend and I were elected on the basis of a manifesto for the whole of this Parliament that set the ambition to reduce net migration to the sustainable levels that existed before the Labour Government came to power. That firmly remains the ambition and focus of this Government, which is why we continue to make reforms in relation to our migration policy and are taking other actions and approaches across Government. I am sure he would support this Government retaining that focus and taking such action.

I want to come on to the overall figures, to which both my hon. Friends referred. It is important to recognise that national insurance numbers and net migration statistics are two separate things. Obviously, national insurance numbers cover all those who register seeking to work, including those who stay for less than 12 months in the UK and short-term migrants, such as those who come to work for a short period or for seasonal work. In contrast, the net migration statistics are estimates for long-term international migration—in other words, those who intend to stay in the UK for 12 months or more for any reason, not just to work.

In order to inform Government policy and, most importantly, to ensure public confidence, it is important that our immigration statistics are robust and reliable. The numbers and data sets are complex, and I have explained the distinctions between the two different sets highlighted this afternoon. I want to correct my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering slightly; the data on net migration statistics are not Home Office data but data from the Office for National Statistics, which is independent of my Department. It is important to put that on the record. The Home Office does not seek to influence those data; we are very much at arm’s length. The ONS produces net migration statistics based on the surveys it conducts and what it extrapolates from those.

There has been a recognition of the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend and others about the differences between datasets. A group of experts from the ONS, the Department for Work and Pensions, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, the Home Office and the Cabinet Office is in place to reconcile data sources, and a report of its findings will be published later this month. I hope he will be assured that that information is forthcoming.

With the measures that the Prime Minister secured in February on EU nationals’ access to benefits, we are ending the culture of getting something for nothing. We think it is right to address the fact that people can come here and claim benefits from day one, and the changes we have introduced will allow us to do that. Once pulled, the new emergency brake on welfare will apply to EU nationals newly arriving in the UK, who will not have full access to our in-work benefits until they have lived here and contributed to our country for four years.

The European Commission has clearly said that the UK already meets the criteria for the implementation of the emergency brake. Reducing that pull factor will help us to control and reduce immigration from the EU. As I have said, the new settlement will also make the whole of Europe more competitive. We have new commitments from the EU to cut red tape, complete the single market and sign new trade deals. Boosting prosperity across the EU will play an important part in tackling some of the root causes of mass migration from one member state to another.
I want to emphasise a few points I made in my statement to the House yesterday on the Dublin regulation. The UK has an opt-out from justice and home affairs measures that we exercise by deciding whether to opt in to new measures. We are not bound to sign up to the proposals that the Commission published yesterday, and we will have three months to consider whether to do so. To be clear, that does not mean there will not be debate about or consideration of those matters in this House. We benefit from that time scale in deciding whether to opt in at the outset to a new measure published by the Commission. That acts as an important protection and safeguard, which the Government have carefully used in determining what is in the best interests of the UK when deciding whether to opt into new measures.

I emphasise the Commission’s statement yesterday, which indicated clearly that under the new proposals, whether or not we decide to opt into them, the UK will continue to be able to operate the existing Dublin regulation, which sets out the principle that those who claim asylum should do so in the first country in which they arrive and that EU countries bearing the greatest responsibility in relation to asylum seekers are supported. That important protection was underlined by the Commission in its statements yesterday.

Mr Hollobone: Even if we keep the existing regulations, we are only sending back 1% of the asylum seekers who make it to our shores. That is negligible and pathetic. Has the Minister any other ideas about how we can send back to the first safe country they came to the thousands of asylum seekers who cross the channel and come to Britain?

James Brokenshire: I do not regard 12,000 people over the past 10 years as negligible. I agree that we need to see reform of the Dublin regulation. We continue to engage in that, while supporting the principles that the existing Dublin regulation clearly sets out. We think it is right to uphold those principles—a point we have made clearly at the EU level, and we will continue to do so—rather than undermine them and effectively set off in a whole new direction, which is not appropriate.

The UK does not agree with the concept of relocation. We have used our protections so that the UK will not be party to those arrangements. It is about reform, not about rewriting Dublin. That is the UK Government position, and it is one we will continue to advocate firmly at meetings with the Council and the Commission.

Mr Hollobone: I commend my hon. Friend for his undoubted efforts. It must be tortuous going to all these EU meetings and banging the table for Britain. I completely understand where he is coming from, but in the existing situation we have the absurdity where if somebody claims asylum in Greece—where most migrants are saying, but when it came to the accession of Romania and Bulgaria there were serious doubts about corruption in those countries and the extent of criminality among some sections of those nations. I remember that because we debated it on the Floor of the House. Since those two countries joined, essentially—Romania, there has been a wave of crime on the streets of London particularly, but also elsewhere in the country, by Romanians and Bulgarians. The Home Office and the police have struggled...
to get on top of that. Hundreds of Romanians and Bulgarians are in our prisons at the moment. What assurance can the Minister give me and my constituents that he is on top of the Albanian and Turkish criminality problem should those countries join?

James Brokenshire: I will make some general points about foreign national offenders before perhaps going on to the specifics. The Government are clear that they will seek to deport foreign nationals who pose a threat to the British public. All foreign national offenders who are given a custodial sentence are considered for deportation. We removed 3,310 European foreign criminals in 2015. That is more than triple the number deported in 2010. We also removed more than 2,250 non-EU offenders last year. Yes, we need to do more work, but I assure my hon. Friend of the focus and attention the Government give to seeing that foreign national offenders are removed from our shores. I undertake that work not just within the Home Office, but with Ministers in the Ministry of Justice and in the Foreign Office.

The deal that we secured for the UK includes important changes in international law that will give us greater freedom to tackle new and emerging threats to the UK and to crack down on abuse by subjecting EU nationals to stronger and longer re-entry bans. It adds important clarification to member states’ powers to exclude or deport EU nationals who pose a threat to our security. The Commission is committed to reviewing criminality provisions when the free movement directive is next updated. As part of the Government’s settlement for the UK in the EU, we have strengthened our hand so that EU nationals who genuinely pose a threat to the UK public, even without a conviction, can be deported.

Mr Hollobone: I am listening carefully to the Minister and that is all fine, but it seems to me and my constituents that, if a foreign national commits a crime in this country and is convicted of that, they should be deported from this country and banned from ever coming back. We are unable to do that while we remain a member of the European Union.

There is supposed to be an EU directive on compulsory prisoner transfers. That directive has been in place for some time. Why are Romanians not going back to Romania and Poles not going back to Poland? Also, can the Minister assure me and my constituents that he is on top of the Turkish and Albanian criminality problem?

James Brokenshire: I can tell my hon. Friend clearly that the precise purpose of the National Crime Agency, which the Government established, is to give much greater focus to organised criminality in all its forms, including cross-border criminality from a range of countries. We have also established the immigration crime taskforce, which brings together officers from the National Crime Agency, Border Force and immigration enforcement to focus on the trafficking and smuggling of people and attempts to trade in misery by exploiting people in that way.

I emphasise the steps we are taking to enhance our understanding of the picture and to disrupt and take action against cross-border criminal groups. Crime is becoming ever more international and my argument is that being party to measures in the EU, through Europol, access to data and the European criminal records information system, helps and supports us. Having that detail and information helps us to fight criminality as it crosses borders. Being outside a number of these structures and not having access to that information would make that work much harder. That is why I judge, on balance, that it is right and benefits the UK to remain in the EU. Benefits arise from those mechanisms, structures and information. For example, foreign nationals who abuse our hospitality by committing crimes in the UK should be in no doubt of our determination to deport them. Initiatives such as Operation Nexus join up immigration enforcement and policing across police forces to focus on foreign national criminals, ensuring that we are doing the necessary checks and harnessing the available information.

Mr Hollobone: The Minister is being extremely generous, which is appreciated. The Prime Minister himself said yesterday in front of the Liaison Committee that the Government have not got on top of the issue of the compulsory transfer of foreign national offenders in our prisons to jails in their own countries. The relevant Government committee met only once every six months to review the issue. What more can the Minister do to put rocket boosters under the implementation of the EU directive?

James Brokenshire: As I have already indicated to my hon. Friend, the situation is not static. There is a continuing commitment and focus across the Government. The Prime Minister rightly and understandably takes a personal interest in the issue to put public protection foursquare in the work of this Government. I assure my hon. Friend on the steps we take and the discussions we have with the Ministry of Justice and the Foreign Office to energise and retain that focus on ensuring that criminals in the UK who have abused our hospitality are removed at the earliest opportunity, whether that be by way of removal that we undertake, or by way of using mechanisms such as prisoner transfer agreements within the EU or outside. I certainly assure him of the continued focus we have brought and will bring, knowing that, although the numbers have gone up, there is much more work we need to do.

Before I finish, I want to deal foursquare with Turkey. I cannot see Turkey joining the EU any time soon. Why do I say that? Well, Turkey has to negotiate 35 different chapters, decisions on setting benchmarks and agreements that they have been met and the closure of those mechanisms. All require a unanimous EU decision. Once those negotiations have been separately completed and closed, there has to be another unanimous decision on accession. Then all 28 member states have to ratify an accession treaty, and the European Parliament has to approve the accession. It should be recognised that France has said that it will hold a referendum on Turkish membership of the EU, and 75% of the French public currently do not want Turkey to join; Austria has said the same. Given that process and the views of other member states, Turkey’s EU accession is not on the cards for many years to come.

There is also an important point about transitional controls. When new countries are admitted to the EU in the future, we will insist on economic convergence before their citizens can benefit from free movement. Therefore,
their GDP per capita, employment rate and income distribution should be close to the average across the EU. We will ensure that those issues are at the heart of any discussion on EU enlargement. We of course have a veto, which would block a new country joining the EU unless tougher controls were introduced.

As I said at the start of my speech, the Government accept European free movement as part of a functioning European internal market. We welcome those who come to work and contribute to a growing UK economy, but we must continue to focus on the scale and speed of immigration into the UK and must take action to tackle those who abuse free movement rights.

The Prime Minister has delivered on the commitment to renegotiate a better deal for Britain in Europe, and it is now for every individual to decide whether they want to remain in the European Union or leave, in the first referendum on the matter in more than 40 years. This is not the end of the process, but an encouraging start in reforming Europe. However, it is clear that the UK will be stronger, safer and better off remaining in the EU. That is the Government’s view and my view, but I welcome the opportunity that we have had this afternoon to debate some of these very important issues relating to migration that are at the heart of the concerns of many people and many right hon. and hon. Members. I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering for giving us the opportunity to air these issues and debate them in a calm and considered way. That is what the debate should be all about, and what I hope will continue to set the tone as we look to the weeks ahead and the referendum towards the end of June.

Mr Hollobone: You will know from your constituency postbag, Mr Pritchard, and my hon. Friends the Members for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) and for Northampton North (Michael Ellis) and the Minister and will know from theirs and even the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the spokesman for Her Majesty’s Opposition, will know from his that immigration is a major concern for all our constituents. These concerns are not racist. They have to do with how this country will cope with a potential wave of immigration such as we have never seen before.

The central estimates predict that our population could go up from 64 million today to 74 million by 2040. The traffic on our roads could increase by 50%. Our GPs are under pressure; our hospitals are under pressure; and our schools are under pressure. Britain is groaning under the strain now. What will it be like if we have more migrants coming from Turkey, Albania, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro and perhaps even Ukraine in the future?

I am grateful to the Minister for his response and to Mr Speaker for granting the debate. My message to my constituents is this: “You have been warned: this is your one and only chance on 23 June; do not muck it up.” I will vote to leave and I hope they do, too, because if we want our country back, it is the only sensible option.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered immigration from the EU.

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 9 May 2016

[MR NIGEL EVANS in the Chair]

EU Referendum Leaflet

4.30 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered e-petition 116762 relating to the Government’s EU referendum leaflet.

The petition, which remains topical, had 219,535 signatures a few hours ago.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The figure is now 219,553 and rising.

Paul Scully: I thank my right hon. Friend for bringing to my attention the extra 20 people who have been galvanised by the thought of this afternoon’s debate. I want to read into Hansard the whole prayer of the petition, headed “STOP CAMERON spending British taxpayers’ money on Pro-EU Referendum leaflets”:

“Prime Minister David Cameron plans to spend British taxpayers’ money on a pro-EU document to be sent to every household in the United Kingdom in the run up to the EU referendum. We believe voters deserve a fair referendum—without taxpayer-funded biased interceptions by the Government.

When an e-petition reaches 10,000 signatures, the Government must issue a response, and they have done so. I will read a brief extract, though I am sure that the Minister will expand on it when he responds. It states:

“This is a big decision for the country. The Government is determined that the public should be clear on what reforms have been agreed, and what EU membership means for the UK.”

The Referendum Act requires the Government to publish reports that set out the outcome of the negotiation of our EU membership and the Government’s opinion on that outcome and provide information on rights and obligations in EU law and on examples of countries that do not have EU membership but do have other arrangements with the EU.”

The leaflet went to households across England between 11 and 13 April, but it is going to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland this week, to avoid the pre-election purdah rules in relation to last week’s elections.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Does my hon. Friend hope, as I do, that it gets there before we disappear into a war?

Paul Scully: What can I say to that? I thank my hon. Friend.

The total cost of the leaflet and the website and marketing that go with it is £9.3 million of taxpayers’ money. On top of that, the Treasury is publishing documents and the Government continue to have propaganda at the top of every gov.uk web page. At least that is not being posted to every house in hard copy at the expense of the resident receiving it.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I actually asked what the budget was for the entire campaign that the Government are conducting, and I was told that it was absorbed within other costs. That surely cannot be the case, and it certainly was not announced in the Budget.

Paul Scully: What worries me most about that answer is that the Treasury is projecting figures to 2030, but it cannot answer questions about Budgets now. That is of concern to me. Some colleagues have encouraged voters to return their leaflets to No. 10, but since that would mean even more cost to the taxpayer if they did it by freepost, I have not followed that line myself.

As might have been predicted, the publication of the leaflet has not been universally welcomed. Jonathan Isaby, chief executive of the TaxPayers Alliance, said:

“This is a disgraceful abuse of taxpayers’ money. When cash is scarce and budgets are tight, politicians should not be wasting nearly £10 million of our cash on political propaganda.

The country is having an important debate about its relationship with the EU and it is essential that it is held on a level playing field.”

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent introduction to the debate. Four hundred and seventy-six of my constituents were so outraged that they signed the petition. Is not the main point that the publication of the leaflet goes against the very British sense of fair play? We want a level playing field in the referendum, but the Government are trying to stack the odds in their favour.

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend is right, and I am glad that Mr Isaby said exactly that. It is important that people in the public eye who have the ear of the press have expressed that opinion.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): The TaxPayers Alliance is neutral in the debate. It is important to bear in mind the fact that it issued a statement only because of the waste of taxpayers’ money; it is not taking a side in the referendum itself.

Paul Scully: Absolutely. As many such organisations find, its members are split either way, so it is right for it to take a neutral view on the main question. That does not mean that it cannot be concerned about the £9.3 million which, as Jonathan Isaby says, is “not government money, it is all taxpayers’ money”.

He concludes by saying that “it is deplorable that ministers see fit to use it to try and instruct us how to vote.”
Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Of course, my hon. Friend knows that that is happening in pursuance of a legal duty introduced into the House of Lords, which became part of our legislation through ping-pong. Is he also aware that I tabled an amendment calling for accuracy and impartiality in that information, which the Minister for Europe, who is here today, told me there certainly would be? Do we not expect a proper answer from him this afternoon?

Paul Scully: I am sure that the Minister has heard that, and I hope that he will respond in full to the debate.

Katie Ghose of the Electoral Reform Society expressed similar concerns, and after the referendum on Scottish independence the Electoral Commission warned the Government over taxpayer-funded propaganda, saying that it could give an “unfair advantage to one side of the argument”.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Is this not a terribly easy case? No previous Labour or Conservative Government have ever thought they should spend taxpayers’ money on promoting Government policies ahead of a general election in the hope of getting a better result. Is that not exactly what the leaflet is doing, and is it not therefore a scandal?

Paul Scully: Absolutely. The Government are taking many difficult decisions across the five years of this Parliament, but we do not need to write in full to every household to explain why we are doing it. That is why the media and websites are there, and that is what Parliament is there for—we can report on that through our speeches and debates. I am not sure that the Government’s case for remaining is being helped, because it is likely that the contents of the leaflet will be long forgotten by the start of the purdah period on 27 May, but the £9.3 million price tag will still resonate with voters.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Since my hon. Friend mentions the content of the leaflet, does he find it strange that there is no mention in it of the existential risk of war and genocide? Does he think that is because a) the Government had not recognised that the risk existed, b) they recognised it but were unwilling to contemplate it, or c) it is a complete fabrication?

Paul Scully: I will come back to that, but that multiple choice question is interesting, because it reminds me of the website www.eureferendum.gov.uk, which goes with the leaflet. We are told that it will be up all the way through 23 June. It majors on pro-Remain propaganda and contains a pdf of the leaflet. It also has an EU quiz, which I had a go at. I fared pretty well on how well I knew the EU. I got a pat on the back: “You’re clearly well informed about the EU.”

Unfortunately, it is exactly for that reason that I will be voting to leave on 23 June. What worries me is that less informed people will buy the line that disaster will unfold if we leave. Surely that cannot be the case. A responsible Government would not go through the whole process of having a referendum when one of the two results would lead to the UK going to hell in a handcart, would they?

Ms Gisela Stuart: During the passage of the Lisbon treaty, the then shadow Foreign Secretary, William Hague, referred to the red card of national Parliaments only ever being invoked if something like the slaughter of the first born was proposed. As the red card was part of the Prime Minister’s deal, does the hon. Gentleman agree that that could be the next threat—one that is not mentioned in the leaflet?

Paul Scully: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is interesting that the orange card in the Lisbon treaty has been replaced by the red card in the reforms secured by the Prime Minister, which sets a higher bar for reversing or rejecting legislation proposed by the EU.

As we have heard, back in February the Prime Minister ruled nothing out if he did not manage to succeed in securing reforms. Those reforms, meagre as they were, were based mainly on pull factors for migration and avoiding deeper integration. He and the remain campaign have gone as far as saying that we might be risking a war if we vote to leave. Is that really what this debate has been reduced to—cheap holidays or war?

I am pleased to see that the Chairman of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), has taken a more measured view. He worked through the possible effects on our foreign policy of two positive options, in a report agreed unanimously by his Committee, before coming to his decision in favour of Brexit only today.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is right that the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee has done extraordinarily well. Has he seen the article in The Daily Telegraph today by the distinguished Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who comes out very strongly indeed and says that what the Prime Minister is talking about with regard to war is complete and utter nonsense? Surely the Chairman of the Defence Committee must know better than the Prime Minister.

Paul Scully: I will leave my hon. Friend to be the judge of that. There is nothing in the leaflet about the actual option available to voters, which is between a UK able to take its own democratic decisions and an EU emboldened by our thumbs up to further integration.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I used my leaflet to light my fire on a cold Yorkshire night; it was a thoroughly useful use of taxpayers’ money. Is not a more important point that, if we vote to remain in by a very small margin—say, less than in the Scottish referendum—a large part of the electorate, including many in my constituency, will feel that the result has been fiddled precisely because of this wasted document that we have all been provided with?

Paul Scully: I really hope that we do not get to that. All Conservative Members in the 2015 intake, no matter what side of the debate we stand on, have signed a letter to say that, come 24 June, we will come together and abide by the result, because we have a Government to support, a country to help to run and difficult decisions to continue to make. It is important that we come
together. We do not want anything to push people towards a sense of unfair treatment on one side or another. My hon. Friend makes a good point.

The Five Presidents’ report shows the direction of travel, should we vote to remain. It sets out plans for fiscal and political union, further pooling of decision making on national budgets and harmonisation of insolvency law, company law, property rights and social security systems. It makes it clear that these plans are to be pursued as single market measures applying to all 28 states. The Governor of the Bank of England admits there are risks of remaining in the European Union, in particular in relation to the development of the euro area. We have been roped into bail-out packages before, despite assurances that that would no longer happen. The latest guarantee, I am afraid, is no better. The Financial Times reports that it has seen the German draft White Paper pushing for progress towards a European army. That was due to emerge in June but is now being held back until July. Make no mistake: should we vote to remain, the European club will not be the same as the one we are already in for long.

The EU budget relentlessly increases. Only last month, Jean-Claude Juncker told my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) that he did not have to answer to her when she asked him what he was doing to bear down on the EU budget at a time when member states were having to bear down on budgets. That is not the answer of a man who cares much about smaller accountable; it is not the view of a man who wants to be left alone to get on with the project without interference from irritating ingrates.

Voting to stay in is not the same as voting to stay put. Despite the leaflet having positive headlines on each page, the body of the text suggests, in a number of ways, that the only way is Europe and that we are stuffed if we leave. Some are implied. For example, it suggests that many jobs might be lost, via the dubious claim that 3 million jobs are linked to the EU—a link described by the academic on whose study that figure was based as “pure Goebbels”. That link, by the way, first came about in around 2000 as a reason for joining the eurozone.

Some claims are more direct but simplistic and with little merit, such as the EU abolishing roaming charges. I can either wait until next year to use my EE phone in the EU at the same rate as I pay in the UK, or I can use my other phone, which is on the Three network, to travel today to EU countries, as well as Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, Switzerland and the USA, with absolutely no roaming charges. I do not have to wait for the EU to catch up with me.

That is another way in which the free market is far more agile than an unwieldy 1950s political project that is representing a smaller proportion of global trade over time as the rest of the world overtakes, despite the number of EU states tripling since we first joined. The economy of every continent has grown over the past decade except that of Antarctica and that of Europe. It is baffling that we should shackle ourselves to a political project with a limited vision to continue being a much smaller power rather than big; that is not the way of our attributes to be a global trading nation. Why are we paying to be a member of the world’s only stagnant customs union?

The leaflet claims that, as the UK is not part of the EU’s border-free zone, we control our own borders. We can certainly check passports at our border, and we can refuse entry to those without any valid identity documents. However, that is not the same as saying that we can refuse entry to anyone from other EU countries if they have valid documents, and it is certainly not the same as saying that we can control immigration.

Mrs Main: Following a recent answer to a question I asked on how many people are turned away from this country, it seems that 20 times more applicants from non-EU countries are turned away than those from EU countries. That shows that, unless people are particularly criminal outside the EU, we have only cursory checks and a cursory ability to stop people from EU countries coming in.

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend makes a good point. My father was born in Burma. I have seen the good side of immigration, but mass uncontrolled immigration has a major effect on our infrastructure and public services—the NHS, housing and school places. We cannot tackle that effectively with one arm tied behind our back. Even the Treasury report uses the assumption that the Government will fail in their policy commitment to reduce immigration to the tens of thousands, not just this year, but every year until 2030.

That is not the platform on which I stood last year, whose immigration was such a huge issue on the doorstep in Sutton and Cheam, as it was around many parts of the country. The equivalent of the population of a city the size of Newcastle comes to the UK from the EU each year. Apart from the obvious lack of ability to control those numbers, those people join the queue in front of migrants from outside the EU who may have more suitable qualifications and skills that we need or desire in this country.

The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) mentioned the leaflets produced for the original 1975 referendum. Page 11 of one of those leaflets claimed:

“No important new policy can be decided in Brussels or anywhere else without the consent of a British Minister answerable to a British Government and British Parliament.”

Well, something has changed over the last few years, has it not? The reality 41 years later is that 65% of our laws, regulations and directives come from Brussels. The emergency brake on migration benefits is not applied by the UK; it is applied by Brussels. The red card system that is held up as a meaningful renegotiation success actually raises the bar for vetoing EU legislation, compared with the current orange card under the Lisbon treaty. Contributions to eurozone bail-outs are still a threat, despite assurances to the contrary, as we have seen before. We are contributing financially towards Turkey’s pre-accession assistance, despite assurances that it will not be a member any time soon.

Enough is enough. We have the fifth largest economy. We have the fourth largest army. We speak the language of business. We have the ideal geographic location for world trade, and we have a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Yes, there are risks on either side, but I am confident that we are big enough, bold enough and entrepreneurial enough as a nation to manage that risk and to thrive if we vote to leave.
That vote to leave is a vote to take control, to bring decision making back to accountable people here in the UK and to decide how we spend up to £350 million per week here in the UK on the NHS, schools, housing and other vital services. It is that positive vision that I will be sharing with people. I perfectly understand the anger and frustration of the petitioners, who see their money—taxpayers’ money, not Government money—spent on propaganda. Even some remainers are quietly dismayed and uncomfortable at that move. I hope that the circling establishment, led by the Government, will cut the hyperbole and exaggerated claims.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned the 1975 referendum, but there is a cautionary tale about that. In 1974, 36% of the population told pollsters that they were opposed to our membership of the then Common Market. The Government and the equivalent of the remain campaign outvoted the leavers by 10 to one with lies, innuendos and supposition. We should be aware, and the Government should be aware, that they can outvote us 10 to one, but there will be a tremendous sense of grievance about it.

Paul Scully: As my hon. Friend outlines, that grievance has lasted for 41 years. That is something we want to avoid at all costs. We must ensure that the decision that the British people take is taken freely and fairly, with as much information—unbiased, impartial information—as possible, and after listening to the two campaign groups. It is important that the Government do not continue to stack the decks on a vital constitutional question that will have long-term consequences far beyond the careers of any of us in this Chamber. That is why the question is rightly being put to the British people in a referendum.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I call Kate Hoey.

Mr James Gray: On a point of order, Mr Evans. Would it not be normal in a debate such as this, having heard from a speaker in favour of the motion, to hear from a speaker opposed to it? Would that not be better? As I understand it, the hon. Lady is on our side. Is there not someone who would advance the opposite case?

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): You have been here long enough, Mr Gray, to know that we go from one side to the other. Kate Hoey caught my eye and therefore Kate Hoey has been selected to speak next. As we go back and forth, if other hon. Members on the Opposition side catch my eye, irrespective of whether they are for or against the motion, I will clearly be in a position to call them.

Kate Hoey: Thank you, Mr Evans. I will not take up my share of the time for the vast array of Labour MPs sitting here! I know that many hon. Members want to speak, so I will just say a few words. I am sorry that so few of my colleagues are here and that our Front-Bench spokesperson will presumably put the case that this leaflet is a wonderful way of spending public money. I am clear that the people who signed the petition feel very strongly that it is a waste of public money and, indeed, that many of them, as I think has been said, were remainers. Many people just felt that this was not fair.

We went through the process and got legislation about referendums, and one aspect of that is that there is a campaign on each side. Each campaign is formally accepted, designated and can spend certain amounts of money and do certain things. They are the people who should be putting the arguments back and forth, apart from all the discussions that are going on anyway in our pubs and supermarkets. I think it is quite shameful that the Prime Minister has seen fit to go against what he would always personally argue about being fair and the British system of doing things—how we do things in this country.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Of course I will give way to the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee.

Mr Jenkin: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who is a fellow member of the Committee. Will she recall that, last summer, we fought valiantly to stop the Government taking powers to limit the application of section 125 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, which would have allowed the Government to carry on campaigning in this manner in the last 28 days of the campaign? Is it not now clear that they were presenting excuses to us as to why they needed those flexibilities? It was simply so that they could carry on exploiting the system, as they are planning to exploit the system and possibly even breach section 125 by keeping up their websites for the entire campaign instead of taking them down for the last 28 days.

Kate Hoey: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He and other members of the Committee feel so strongly about this matter that they are prepared to take very strong action if we do not get agreement from the Government to take the websites down. What is even more amazing to the public is this. When they talk about “the Government”, it is the Cabinet, and the Cabinet is actually split on this matter. If the Government were really being fair, two thirds of the leaflet would have been from one side and one third would have been from the Brexit side.

Andrew Percy: Is not the situation even worse than that? The official policy of the party of government is neutrality.

Kate Hoey: I do not normally look at the detail of Conservative party policy, but I am very pleased to hear and to repeat that. I felt very angry when the leaflet came out. I looked through it and saw all the so-called facts that we can go through and spend a lot of time pulling to pieces, but when it comes down to it, I have great confidence in the common sense of the British public. I think they will already have seen through the leaflet and seen it for what it is—full propaganda. Then, of course, we wake up literally every day to another shock-horror dreadful scare story. The stories become
more ridiculous every day, today’s one being just about the most ridiculous possible—that we are threatened with war. In fact, it is absolutely shameful, because there are some people in this country who believe Prime Ministers and who will be slightly worried about that. It is absolutely shameful that the level of debate from the leadership of this country is so trivial and ridiculous that they come up with scare stories such as that.

**Dr Fox:** The hon. Lady should not believe that we have heard the worst—we have not yet got to plague and pestilence or the imminent asteroid impact that will happen if we vote to leave the European Union. Is this not more than a question of money or even fairness or the rubbish content of the leaflet itself? Is not the real importance here the fact that it may, if there is a very tight result, call into question the legitimacy of the result itself? Does the hon. Lady agree that those who believe that they should win the referendum at any price might want to consider what “any price” might look like?

**Kate Hoey:** That is a very important point. The one thing that we all said when we were debating the details of the referendum Bill was that the referendum had to be seen as free and fair. At the moment, I do not have confidence in its being free and fair, and I do not even have confidence that if, nearer the time, it will make it even less free and fair. I genuinely have that concern, and it is a shocking thing even to be happen to make it even less free and fair. I genuinely have that concern, and it is a shocking thing even to be thinking as a democratically elected Member of this great House of Commons.

**Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con):** I refer hon. Members to my declaration of interest as a director of Grassroots Out Ltd. One thing that seems to be causing great confusion in the country is the statement on the back of the leaflet about needing to register to vote in order to participate in the referendum. Does the hon. Lady agree that Ministers need to do more to set the record straight? The fact is that if people are on the electoral register, they are registered to vote; it is wrong and misleading to suggest otherwise.

**Kate Hoey:** That is a very important point. I hope the Minister will clarify how the Government will do more to reassure people that they do not have to re-register if they are already on the register, because many people are worried about that.

While we are talking about all the different scare stories, I have been thinking about the way every time the Prime Minister speaks or some of the remainers speak, they challenge us on which international figures support our leaving the European Union. I just have this vision that the Prime Minister will do something so that one morning we will wake up and hear on the “Today” programme that President Putin has asked us to stay in the European Union. That is the level to which I think we have got.

**Dr Julian Lewis rose—**

**Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair):** Order. Before we hear from Dr Lewis, let me just say that I am sure that each and every one of you has an interesting ringtone on your mobile phone, but I do not want to hear them during the debate, so please check that your phones are in silent mode.

**Dr Lewis:** For a moment, I thought that that “Ride of the Valkyries” ringtone meant that the remainers were coming late to try to save the day. Has the hon. Lady not noticed a certain inconsistency in the Government’s position? They try to frighten us with the fact that President Putin, evidently, would like us to leave, whereas it is regarded as praiseworthy that the President of communist China wants us to remain. It seems to me that there is an element of cake and eating it at the same time.

**Kate Hoey:** Fortunately, the people who will ultimately decide are our constituents. There is one vote for everyone. We are all equal here. Everybody will have their say and, I hope, we will not be relying on President Obama or on any other President.

**Mr Jenkin:** It is worth remembering that it is not the first time that the United States of America has misconstrued its own interests. President Roosevelt did not want Churchill to fight Hitler. He wanted us to make peace with Mussolini. Ronald Reagan pleaded with Margaret Thatcher not to take the Falkland Islands by military force but to do some kind of shared sovereignty deal with a south American dictator. Our allies may be our allies, but they are not always right.

**Kate Hoey:** Indeed, President Obama was quite wrong. When I was in Washington last weekend, we met a lot of senior Democrats and Republicans who said to us quite publicly, behind the scenes, that the UK leaving the EU would really not make any difference whatever to the United States. That is what the ordinary political person in America thinks. However, the vast majority of the American public do not even know what the EU is, so what President Obama said is not too worrying.

It annoyed me so much that one of the facts in the leaflet is:

“The UK has secured a special status in the EU.”

I have read a lot about that and have been through various documents, and I would love to see where that wording is actually included in the renegotiation document by the Heads of Government.

The renegotiation is not legally binding. The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) has done a lot of work on that in the European Scrutiny Committee. We cannot be confident that the aim of ever closer union will, in any way, do anything other than to take the renegotiation into account. It is so ridiculous that that has been put in, and I want the Minister to respond to that point.

**Ms Gisela Stuart:** I raised that point with the Prime Minister and asked him whether he could cite a single occasion when ever closer union was the sole basis for legal judgment. He wrote back to me admitting that there was not an example.

**Kate Hoey:** That “fact” is therefore completely untrue. Although I do not want us to spend more public money, we really should produce another leaflet pointing out all the things that are wrong in this one.
Sir William Cash: It is a question not only of whether the renegotiation is legally binding, but of whether it is legally binding and irreversible. It is not.

Kate Hoey: I always bow to the hon. Gentleman’s wisdom. I will not go through all the facts in the leaflet because I am sure that everybody would like to mention particular points.

When someone writes the history of this Administration and, particularly, of this Prime Minister, the way the Prime Minister has behaved on this matter will go down as very sad. It is eating into the kind of country the UK is. He should be ashamed of what he is doing. I just hope that, in some way, the response here and from the public will make him realise that he is clearly showing the country that he is deeply frightened about what will happen on 23 June. If that is the reason that all the scare stories are coming out, I am pleased. On 23 June, I want the Great British public to speak out, get out to vote and take us out of the anti-democratic EU.

5.4 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My fellow European Scrutiny Committee member, the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), so rightly referred to scaremongering. I simply say that there is nothing to fear but fear itself. Those words will haunt the Prime Minister in due course.

The leaflet arises from sections 6 and 7 of the European Referendum Act 2015. The words were only introduced, with a degree of connivance, I would suggest, in the House of the Lords, and came back to the House of Commons on ping-pong. We did not actually have an opportunity properly to look at the wording, which imposes a legal duty on the Government to provide information.

I tabled an amendment on the question of accuracy and impartiality. As the matter was drawing to a vote, I was besieged by various buzzing bees, who suggested that I should withdraw the amendment. I said, “No, I will not, unless I know that the Minister will answer the question I am putting to him.” The question was like this: “Yes or no—will he accept that the information must be accurate and impartial?” The Minister replied, “Certainly,” and said it would be “perverse” to do otherwise. He remembers that and knows perfectly well I am saying exactly what happened.

When such a senior and highly respected Minister in the House of Commons replies on the Floor of the House specifically to the question of withdrawing an amendment, it is regarded by all of us on both sides of the House as being binding on the Government. I simply cannot accept that that has in any way been fulfilled. I am sorry to have to say that I regard it as disgraceful that this leaflet has been produced in those circumstances. It is not accurate and it is not impartial. In fact, a whole slew of White Papers have been produced in pursuance of those two sections of the Act.

To add insult to injury, when a White Paper is presented to Parliament—unlike the leaflet, which goes to all the households—by the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for Europe, the ministerial code kicks in. In Prime Minister’s questions, I asked the Prime Minister whether he accepted the White Papers were in breach of the accuracy and impartiality prescribed in the framework of the ministerial code, for which he has direct responsibility. It is up to him to make certain that those are reviewed as the situation could even lead to resignation by senior Ministers and Cabinet Ministers. This is a very grave and serious matter. It is not just a question of whether we like it or not.

I entirely agree with and commend the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who laid out many of the issues and the reasons for the petition. We ought to be 100% behind the petition for all the reasons that so many hon. Members are here today. A serious issue lies beneath the petition, which is that what has happened is a serious breach of the ministerial code. Nobody can argue that those White Papers fulfil the criteria.

With regard to the issue of war, the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) were extremely apposite. The reality is that none of that is in the documents, and nor is the catastrophic effect that the Chancellor of the Exchequer yesterday alleged would happen with regard to leaving the single market in reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Jonathan Lord). The plain fact is that the omissions—to get this right regarding impartiality and to be anything other than economical with the truth—are of the gravest concern to the people of this country. They are being asked to go to the polling booths on 23 June on the basis of arguments to which they have a right, particularly as they are paying for it and for the running of the machinery of government, which is being thrown behind the referendum, despite the fact that we won the argument on purdah. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) said, it is atrocious that the machinery of government is being used to put such material on the Government website. That would be regarded as unacceptable in any democratic country.

I take the view of the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) on what happened in 1975, and I was around in 1975—indeed, I have been around since 10 May 1940, so it is my 76th birthday tomorrow. As it happens, I was born on the day that Hitler decided to invade France and Holland, and Churchill became Prime Minister that evening, so I take particularly badly to the Prime Minister’s references to what Churchill would think about all this. We were drawn into that war by unprovoked aggression and, with respect to the questions of defence and other matters contained in these documents, I do not believe for one minute that the people who fought and died in the war, as my father did, would ever have believed that we would be where we are now as a result of the sacrifice they made.

Dr Julian Lewis: My hon. Friend has just anticipated my intervention. I recently raised that point at Prime Minister’s questions, because I know my hon. Friend does not normally touch on it. His father paid the ultimate sacrifice at the battle of Normandy, having won the Military Cross. He lies in France, having secured the freedom of the people of not only Britain but France to rule themselves. We now have a little video, timed to coincide with the Prime Minister’s speech, showing four veterans of world war two saying that they were fighting for a united Europe, but I very much doubt that that is the view of the vast majority of people who fought and died in that campaign.
Sir William Cash: I endorse my right hon. Friend’s intervention. It also made me particularly angry to hear Mr Juncker say that Eurosceptics should go and visit war cemeteries—people will understand the impact of that comment on someone like me—and I deeply resented President Obama’s reference to the same matter with respect to both United Kingdom and American troops. My father fought with American troops, and I am absolutely certain that the kind of undemocratic, dysfunctional, authoritarian, centralised system represented by the European Union, which does not work, is the antithesis of what they fought for. I want to get that firmly on the record.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that it is a measure of the remain campaign’s desperation that it has to invoke the memory of those who died fighting dictatorships in order to try to present its case as patriotic when, in fact, we know from all the language that the campaign uses that it wants to do the country down?

Sir William Cash: The hon. Gentleman is right. I would go further, with reference to the historical analogies that permeate these documents and what the Prime Minister said today, and say that the very idea that Brexit would create war completely turns on its head the reality that, for at least four centuries, this country was drawn into all the wars in which it has been engaged by the desire of those in Europe to create European empires. That started, for example, with Philip of Spain and the armada, and later there were the Dutch wars, the Napoleonic wars and the first and second world wars. Those are realities. We were drawn into those wars. If we leave the European Union, we will be able to stand alone and, as we did in 1940, remind people that we are not going to be part and parcel of this dysfunctional system, which has so much instability and insecurity built into it that it is bound to lead to deep disturbance. Our attempt to make sense of all that has led us to argue so strongly for so many years that this European Union is dysfunctional, which is why, ultimately, we have to leave it.

The hon. Member for Vauxhall referred to the European Scrutiny Committee’s reports. She is an excellent member of the Committee, which I have the honour to chair. In the Liaison Committee’s examination of the Prime Minister last Wednesday, I was asked to go first after the Chairman, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie). I explained to the Prime Minister and to the Committee why I believe that the voters are being cheated on 23 June and, ultimately, a false prospectus is being offered to them. The reason is simple: the outcome of the question of whether there will be a full-on treaty change, which we were promised, cannot be guaranteed, if at all, until after the vote. When the voter goes to the voting booth and votes, they simply will not know whether, for example, there will be a treaty change, whether the European Court will intervene, whether there will be a change of Government or whether there will be a referendum in any other country on the basis of the changes that are made. The outcome of any one of those questions cannot be guaranteed under any circumstances, so I allege that requiring people to vote in such circumstances is cheating the voters.

I was most impressed to see the numbers on the petition, and it may be of interest to Members to know that the clip of my allegation that the Government and the Prime Minister are cheating the voters has now reached 175,000 viewings on Facebook, which is quite a lot. I strongly believe that that message is getting home to all the people who need to hear it.

The question of the single market seems to be so central to the economic case, the political case, the democratic case and the accountability case for why we should leave because it is in contradiction to what the people fought and died for in the last war. That is extremely important, but the Government also make an economic case in the leaflet, which talks about our having a massive single market:

“EU countries buy 44% of everything we sell abroad, from cars to insurance.”

What the leaflet does not say is outlined in a note I received from the House of Commons Library, and it is as simple as this. When we are trading with 27 other member states, the question of whether we have a deficit in goods and services, and in imports and exports, is the equivalent of asking whether we are making a loss in relation to those 27 member states. This is the answer from the House of Commons Library:

“UK trade deficit with EU countries: £67.8 billion.”

That is annual, and it is going up. That is a vast amount of money in our dealings with the single market, and it demonstrates that the single market does not work for us across the board. On the other hand—this is important—Germany has a £31.5 billion trade surplus with the 27 other member states. We make a loss of £67.8 billion, and they have a surplus of £81.8 billion. I do not have time to go into all the reasons, but it is a salutary lesson about the real value of the single market to us.

The UK’s trade surplus with the rest of the world, in relation to the same goods and services on which we make such a monumental loss with the other 27 member states, was £31.1 billion last year, and it is growing. We have a bright future. The Chancellor of the Exchequer’s accusation that leaving the single market would be catastrophic, the idea that we would end up at war if we do not carry out the diktat that the Government are issuing to the British people, and all the accumulated international bodies that are being brought in to support this flimsy argument that we should stay in, are all to be taken into account when people come to vote on 23 June.

I reject the manner in which the Government have gone about this. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam has done us a service in bringing this issue to the House, as have the petitioners. Jayne Adye deserves 100% credit for doing so. There is only one answer to this shambolic European Union, and that is to vote to leave it.

5.20 pm

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): Oh, the joys of email inboxes. I received an email about the leaflet; it had an attachment that I printed off. It looked much like the Government’s leaflet, except that it was by “A British citizen”, who had written her own leaflet based on the Government’s, called “Why I believe that voting to leave the European Union is the best decision for the UK”. I thought her leaflet made a darn sight more sense than the Government’s. Given the
I object to the final page of the leaflet. The Minister is looking at it; he needs to note this. People came up to me in my advice surgery saying, “Do I have to register to vote for the referendum?” I did not know what they were talking about until I looked at the back page, which says:

“If you’re aged 18 or over by 23 June and are entitled to vote, this is your chance to decide.”

So far, so good.

“Registration ends on 7 June. Find out how to register at aboutmyvote.co.uk and register online at gov.uk/register-to-vote.”

People are reading that to mean that they will have to register specifically for this vote. That is misleading.

It is also highly dubious to align the issuing of postal votes closely with the date on which purdah will kick in. The Electoral Commission is issuing postal votes very early on. In my understanding, the whole purpose of purdah is so that Government machinery will not unduly influence voters’ decisions. Electors are used to political parties taking sides, but they are not used to the Government, in their guise as the Government, taking deeply party political decisions. I want the Minister to show me that he has taken due account of that, so that purdah and the issuing of postal votes will not overlap and there will not be some Treasury report a day before the postal votes land on doormats telling us that we are all going to starve and start sending children up chimneys again. Will he have a word with the electoral registration officers about the misleading statement that has been made?

Similarly, we must put the costs of the leaflet into context. It has cost £9.3 million. The Electoral Commission was set up as an independent body to facilitate fair conduct of such a referendum. As part of that fair conduct, two organisations have been designated to make the case for and against. Those participating have strict financial limits. The Minister will have to explain to me why it is fair and proper to allow the in and out campaigns to raise £7 million each from individual sources, not Government money. There is a real misconception about that. People think that the campaigns have been given that money by the Government. They have not. They have been given permission to raise it. Yet the Government, in one mailshot, have spent more taxpayers’ money than they are spending on the whole process of facilitating the election. That kind of imbalance is simply wrong.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I have done some brief calculations on the back of an envelope. We have 650 MPs—let us say that each of us was entitled to £13,500. There are a couple of worthwhile projects in my constituency that I would have supported, including a new transport plan for St Teath. Does the right hon. Lady have any projects in her constituency on which she would have liked to spend that £13,500?

Ms Stuart: A couple of schools immediately come to mind, never mind hospitals.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): It might help the right hon. Lady to know that the Minister for Europe and I share a county in which the health trusts’ deficit this year is approximately the same as the amount of money spent on the leaflet.
Ms Stuart: The sad thing is that not only has that money not been spent more helpfully and usefully, it has been spent to undermine democratic processes. What worries me more than anything else is that this vote is meant to reinvigorate democracy and encourage participation, but it is causing increased mistrust and cynicism, which is not helpful.

Tom Pursglove: One thing that I know as a former local councillor is how much work local authorities and public bodies must do to prove value for money. Does the right hon. Lady think that the Minister will be able to set out for us what value-for-money steps were taken in the procurement?

Ms Stuart: I am sure that he could, but the problem is that it is a bit like spilt milk—one once the damage is done, if we were to say that we wanted another leaflet putting the facts straight, that would simply compound the problem.

The only points that I want the Minister to respond to in his summing-up are how intends to redress the statement about voter registration and how he will deal with the situation with postal votes and purdah.

5.30 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The Government document is a disgrace. It is morally wrong, it is financially wrong and I think that it will backfire on them politically, which is the only good news in this otherwise rather sad debate. We should not need to do this. Any British democratic Government should understand that we want to have fair elections and referendums, and that we have a long tradition of not taking taxpayers’ money to spend in promotion of party political purposes or other political purposes during an election or referendum.

In my experience, no Government have ever taken taxpayers’ money close to an election to propagandise for party policies. Nor should this Government be taking money from the many taxpayers who wish to leave the European Union in order to spend it on propaganda to try to thwart their wishes.

I was proud to stand in the general election on a platform of offering people a free choice and a free vote, after all these years when we have had no right to such a thing, and it is a great pity that it is being sullied by taking money from taxpayers and spending it in the distorting way that others have already mentioned.

I know that many other colleagues wish to speak, so I will concentrate on just two matters. This leaflet is extremely misleading and part of a very misleading campaign that is based on fear and misinformation about our relationship with the EU and what the EU is doing to us. The two claims in the leaflet that I wish to highlight go together in some ways. The leaflet says that we now have “a special status” and that often we can get our own way as a result of that special status. So I thought I would look at three crucial areas and ask, “Do we have a special status and are we getting our way?” Those areas are our right to choose our own taxes; our right to control our own borders; and our right to decide what benefits to give to which people who live in our community.

All previous Governments who have negotiated treaties have always solemnly promised Parliament that we still had complete control over what taxes we raised, complete control over what benefits we chose to spend our money on and complete control over our borders. I am afraid, however, that none of those things is true.

Let us take part of the negotiation—this special status. We were told that, as a result of the negotiation, changes would be made to the VAT system. It is clearly the settled will of this Parliament that the tampon tax should be abolished, and it is clearly illegal under European law to do so. It is also clear that last summer our European Union Commission took our Government to court and successfully prosecuted them for daring to set the VAT rate on green products—insulation, all sorts of boiler controls and other things that promote the green agenda—at 5% instead of at the full VAT rate, and of course the Commission successfully won that court case. So our Government are now under a legal requirement of the European Court of Justice to put our VAT up to 20%, although of course they have not done so before the referendum because it would be embarrassing and tedious for them to do so.

We were then told that this new special status means that that is going to change, so that we will not have to put up our VAT on green products and we will be able to get rid of the VAT on tampons. So I looked at the document that the EU has now issued following the negotiation to see whether that is indeed the case.

The first thing to note is that the consultation that the EU is holding on VAT reform is mainly about centralising and taking more powers to Brussels over VAT, not giving more powers to member states. The second thing to note is that the document makes absolutely no reference whatever to the EU-UK agreement, or to the special status that we asked for and we were told we had got on VAT. The third thing is that, in the talismanic last couple of paragraphs about whether it might be possible to offer more freedom to member states to choose their own rates of VAT, no mention is made of the rates that we wish to remove or keep low and no guarantee is offered that there will be any legislation forthcoming.

Again, the document says that it is terribly important not to have tax competition within the single market and very important to have a central policy that has political support.

One has to read that document to understand that there is absolutely no agreement on special status and no agreement at all that the UK can choose its own VAT rates. That is a broken promise. Also, we are told by the Treasury that we will lose a series of court cases on corporation tax again in this Parliament. We lost many such cases in the last Parliament and it cost £7 billion of revenue, which the British Parliament wished to raise on corporations but had to give back, and the Treasury forecast is that we will lose another £7 billion in this Parliament in losing court cases in the ECJ. The Treasury has never suggested that this new special status will prevent that. Therefore, it is quite obvious that we cannot raise taxes from companies where we want to and we cannot cut taxes on consumers where we want to, and that we have no “special status”.

If one then asks, “Is there a special status on borders?” the answer is, “No, of course, there isn’t.” We are governed by the freedom-of-movement provisions and that means we have to allow in anyone who can get a job or who is seeking work under the provisions of the freedom-of-movement clauses. The Government, who made a solemn promise to the electorate to reduce the
number of migrants coming into the country—so that we can catch up with the need for more school places, more GP surgeries, more hospital capacity, more roads and more houses for people—are unable to fulfil that pledge in any way, and the Treasury has now admitted that that pledge is for the birds over the five years of this Parliament and all the way out to 2030. Goodness knows why the Treasury thought it could forecast to 2030, because it cannot even forecast for this year, let alone to 2030.

**Mrs Main:** My right hon. Friend has just made a fantastic point about the lack of transparency. Does he share my concern? An independent report states that 3.5 million people are expected to come in by that time—it will probably be considerably more than that—but there is no indication to the British people where they are going to go, and it is calculated that a quarter of a million acres of extra developed land will be required to provide the housing for those people coming in.

**John Redwood:** My hon. Friend is right—there is absolutely no proper provision for the very large number of people that the Treasury now admits are likely to come in. That is one of the few Treasury forecasts that I might believe. It is quite obvious that it could not forecast its own public spending, its own interest rates or anything in the recent Office for Budget Responsibility and Treasury documents. It had to make another revision again in the March Budget—it revised the forecast made in November—because it had found it difficult to grasp how the world might change between November and March. So there is this inability to forecast the economic numbers, but for once I think the Treasury may be honest in forecasting a substantial increase in migration. I suspect that the Treasury’s estimate is an underestimate because it has been constantly underestimating these figures in recent years, and it proves that we have no control over our borders and no “special status” whatsoever.

The third area is benefits. The Prime Minister made a great deal about benefits in the renegotiation; it was one of the few areas where he really pushed quite hard to get reform in the way that Britain wanted. I think both major parties campaigning in the last election wanted, for example, to no longer have to pay child benefit to children who are not resident in our country, but apparently that is something that we cannot negotiate. There is no “special status” to allow us to decide that child benefit should go to children living in our country rather than to children living elsewhere. There is some kind of fudge whereby we could pay the benefit at the level that applies in that country, which means in some cases that we will have to pay a higher level of benefit, although in other cases it means we will pay a lower level of benefit. So there is absolutely no control there.

Again, both major parties wanted amendments so that people coming here to work under the freedom-of-movement provisions would not automatically get the full range of benefits until they had been here for a bit and made some kind of contribution. We were not able to get a guarantee on that, either. There is some sort of four-year clause as a temporary expedient, but the benefits have to be phased in over the four years and the negotiating aim was not met.

On the big three things, therefore, which all independent democratic countries control through their Parliaments and Governments, Britain is unable to exert control: we cannot decide what taxes to impose; we cannot decide what benefits to spend our money on; and we cannot control our own borders. So I have to submit that the Government are completely misrepresenting the position when they say that they have negotiated a “special status”. They are completely wrong when they say that shows we can get our own way. They could not even get their own way on a very limited number of negotiating objectives at a point when they were threatening withdrawal and a referendum, so how will they ever get their way at all once the referendum is out of the way if, by any chance, the British people have not seen through this and voted to stay?

**Sammy Wilson:** Does the right hon. Gentleman find it strange that, although the Government claim to have special status on some issues—and he has proved they have not gained such status—they refer time and again to things that we have opted out of? They make a case for joining Europe, but they boast that through our special status, “We opt out of this, we opt out of the euro, we opt out of border controls—we opt out of a whole range of things.” The Government are actually making a case for staying clear of the European project.

**John Redwood:** I agree. I always liken it to someone joining a football club and then announcing truculently that they have no wish to play football or watch football, getting cross when they go to club functions and people talk about football, and wanting to reduce the club subscription because, as they do not join in the football, they think they are overpaying. That is what the Government are doing to Europe. They do not want to join the single currency or Schengen, or the quota system for refugees. They do not like political union being talked about, although that is the EU’s main purpose, and they think that the club subscription is too large. They are right about one thing: the club subscription is far too large for us because we do not believe in practically any of the club’s purposes. Most of us would draw the conclusion, however, that the simplest thing to do would be to leave the club and spend the subscription on things we do like.

5.41 pm

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for an outstanding opening presentation and for taking so many friendly and supportive interventions. I also echo the thanks to the petition organisers, who have done a brilliant job. As of now we are at 219,560 signatories.

I have just one regret about the debate. It ought to have been held in the main Chamber of the House of Commons, because then we would have been able to have a vote at the end of it and put to the test the sincerity or otherwise of those who say that the Government have behaved decently, fairly and honourably, rather than deeply unscrupulously, over the production of this expensive leaflet. It was produced at the expense of taxpayers, most of whom—hopefully we will find this out on independence day, 23 June—do not believe the Government’s argument.
I must make an observation on something quite striking here. I may be wrong, and I may have misinterpreted the voting intentions of some of the colleagues from various parties who are here today, but it seems that there is not a single right hon. or hon. Member here, other than the Front-Bench spokesmen for the Government, the official Opposition and the Scottish National party, who is likely to try to defend the production of the leaflet. If that is the case, it may well be that had a vote been possible, at least among Members in this Chamber, any motion deploiring the Government’s production of such a leaflet at such expense for the benefit of one side in a contested referendum debate would have been overwhelmingly carried.

There is something else I find deeply worrying about the whole process. It seems that the Government arrived at their conclusions first and are now scrabbling around ever more desperately for one new argument after another to buttress them. As right hon. and hon. Members have already asked, why were these terribly important arguments about war and peace not included in the leaflet that was sent out? Why, indeed, was the Prime Minister willing to threaten—during what appear, I am sorry to say, to have been sham negotiations in Europe—that if he did not get his way on whatever minor changes he was trying to get he would be prepared to leave the European Union? If war, pestilence, flood, boils, frogs and the rest of the 10 plagues of Egypt will descend on us—

Sir William Cash: The apocalypse.

Dr Lewis: The apocalypse as well. A future apocalypse, if not an immediate one. If all that is going to happen, why on earth was the Prime Minister ever willing to contemplate leaving the European Union in the first place?

Mrs Main: Does my right hon. Friend find it rather odd that we are so weak and pathetic that we cannot stand on our own, but are so strong that we are preventing all the other European countries from turning their arms on each other?

Dr Lewis: Indeed, and I will come to the question about war and peace a little further along, if I may. It is a strange argument to suggest that out of something between 150 and 200 countries recognised at the United Nations, we, with the fifth strongest economy, are somehow deemed incapable of surviving outside the European Union. The vast majority of countries in the world do not, at least so far, belong to the 28-strong European Union network of nations. Who knows where the ambition will end? Perhaps one day half the countries in the world, or all of them, will belong to the European Union. One thing is clear, however. If countries are forced to integrate without the consent of the peoples concerned, the resultant political construct cannot possibly be run democratically.

Sir William Cash: Does my right hon. Friend accept that although we keep being told that we have to stay in the European Union because the other countries want and even need us for stability, democracy and accountability, the one thing that can be guaranteed to come out of the process of political integration is that we will be dumped into the second tier of a two-tier Europe, which I believe will largely be run by Germany? The consequence will be that we will not have influence because of the majority voting system and the lack of democracy.

Dr Lewis: As in so many things, my hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Let us be in no doubt about this: if, heaven forbid, we vote to remain in the European Union on 23 June, other countries will know once and for all that our ability to assert any independence or influence within that organisation is done for.

Mr Jenkin: To pick up a refrain from the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), the entire construct of the document that we are discussing, and indeed of the Prime Minister’s speech today, is that somehow we are withdrawing from Europe. We want to leave the European Union, which is a failing institution, but we want to remain an active member of NATO and remain engaged with our European allies and partners on all the matters that the European Union deals with. We just do not want to be told what to do as a member of the European Union.

Dr Lewis: Absolutely, and in which of the two alternative models can we more influence other European countries? We have one model in which we can express our view and, with a democratic decision of our own Parliament, pursue a policy to try to enact that view. Alternatively, we can take the view that we will have more influence by submerging our voting power in a collective pool of voters, with a construct made up of legislatures and commissioners appointed by the 27 other member countries as well as by Britain. We can be outvoted time and again by an overwhelming majority of other countries’ Parliaments or commissioners and have our views totally disregarded.

It is understandable that people on the other side of the Atlantic who on two occasions, against their initial inclinations, have been forced into a conflict originating on the continent of Europe as a result of German militarism would prefer that Britain remain part of an organisation that they know can spell trouble for the United States of America in the future, just as it has in the past. However, they are making a fatal miscalculation if they think that we will be better able to keep the Governments of the remaining parts of Europe on some sort of track of common sense and reliable policy making by being outvoted by them at every turn. We need a system in which we can make our criticisms, and if those criticisms are not accepted we can go on making them and formulate policies to try to mitigate the effects of foolish policies that others might adopt.

I must say that the developments we have seen in the past couple of days are frankly very worrying. First there was the use of intelligence chiefs to say publicly that we would somehow be less safe in our intelligence sharing if we left the EU. At least one of the two intelligence chiefs concerned told me privately that we would be no worse off. We have seen that before—we saw the same operation when Downing Street tried to get a large number of retired military figures to sign up to a letter. Several of them did, but quite a lot of them refused. One of those whose signature was attached had not agreed, and Downing Street had to apologise to him. Another who had reluctantly agreed said that it
was nevertheless unpleasant that he felt pressured to sign and that it was not the sort of letter he would have written himself.

Let not the Government turn around with innocence in their eye and say, “Good heavens, the very idea that we would try to manipulate senior figures or public opinion is outrageous.” The reality is that they have been caught doing it before. For that reason, they probably did not do it directly with the two intelligence chiefs, but we all know the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s official line on Britain remaining in Europe. No. 10 would not have to do a great deal to persuade a former senior diplomat—later the head of an intelligence agency—to put forward a line amenable to the Government’s standpoint.

Dr Lewis: I would not like to attribute any particular motivation. It may often go no further than the fact that for someone with a long and honourable record of public service, who is used to serving democratically elected Governments, it is very difficult to refuse a request from high up in the political establishment—possibly from the Prime Minister or the Prime Minister’s representative—that they should speak out in support of Government policy. Let us put it this way: to refuse might be deemed ungrateful and against the ethos of civil servants’ obedience to Government rule. One does not have to look for base motives; one can simply say that it would take a special sort of independence of mind for someone to tell the Prime Minister or his representative that they were not going to help out in his hour of need.

It certainly seems to be an hour of need, because the reality is that the campaign seems to be getting more and more desperate and unscrupulous. Everything the remain campaigners do seems to be unavailing in shifting public opinion. The further they dig themselves into holes through dodgy tactics, the harder it becomes to defend them. I revert to what I said at the beginning: it appears that no Back Bencher is willing to attend the debate and speak up in favour of the Government’s tactics in producing this one-sided leaflet. These things do not happen by accident.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it goes further than that? Many Back Benchers—I include myself among them—feel desperately let down by the Government. We genuinely had an open mind. In my case, I am generally Eurosceptic, but we genuinely wanted to see what the Prime Minister came back with from the negotiations before we made up our mind. Now we discover that the Government had no intention of ever negotiating before we made up our mind. Now we would try to manipulate senior figures or public opinion to put forward a line amenable to the Government’s standpoint.

Dr Lewis: Yes, it is absolutely clear that the Government are and always have been set on remaining come what may. The manoeuvres do not happen by accident. It is no accident that there appears to be a total boycott of the debate by Members from the remain side of the argument, other than the Front Benchers who have to be here. It was no coincidence that we had the interventions from the retired heads of M15 and M16 just 24 hours before the Prime Minister made his speech today. Such things are orchestrated. I can only assume that the more questionable the Government’s tactics come to be, the less able they will be to find people to stand up and defend them.

I had better bring my remarks to a close, because many other Members wish to speak. I do not know whether the debate will go right to 7.30 pm, but although I will stay as long as I can, I apologise for the fact that I will not be here for the winding-up speeches if the debate goes to its full length.

The Government’s only defence of the leaflet, which they have produced at such great cost to the public purse, is, “We can only look at the facts honestly, and the facts as we see them all come down on one side of the argument.” If that were honestly the case, there would be no need for a referendum in the first place. There would not be huge disagreement among a large part of the population with the idea that Britain should remain in an organisation hellbent on doing away with the system of parliamentary democracies that has kept the peace and replacing it with an undemocratic supranational Government. That could bring about the tensions and conflicts that always happen when we do not have democratic Governments dealing with other democratic Governments. Who can name an example of a modern democratic Government of one country going to war with a modern democratic Government of another? No one, because it does not happen. The idea that breaking up our system of peace-loving democracies and shoehorning people into a supranational state will somehow keep the peace rather than undermine it clearly shows that the Government have entered into something of an “Alice Through the Looking Glass” existence.

I once again thank everyone who has contributed to the debate so far. I am sure that when the time comes, the country will seize its one and only opportunity. If the Government win, they will expect us to accept defeat with good grace, just as we would expect them to accept defeat with good grace if we win. In reality, by adopting one-sided tactics such as producing this propaganda leaflet at public expense, they are delegitimising the result, and no one will benefit from that.
Mrs Trevelyan: Indeed. As a member of the Public Accounts Committee, I think that value for money was not given a great deal of consideration when the document was published.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Two hundred and one of my constituents signed the petition, as did 214 constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson). The leaflet has not been sent to the people of Northern Ireland yet, and yet the anger grows. Since the arguments for the Government’s proposition in the leaflet have been shot through so convincingly, does the hon. Lady believe that the Minister should at least take the honourable step of saying, “Enough is enough; we recognise we made a mistake and we will not send it to the devolved regions”?

Mrs Trevelyan: I hope the Minister takes note of that and perhaps saves the taxpayer a little bit of the money that the Government have so unscrupulously chosen to spend.

I want to look at one section of the leaflet—the wider issues have already been raised by other hon. Members and will no doubt be covered in more detail. The heading on page 7 is, “What happens if we leave?” That is clearly an open question—it sounds like an A-level question. One would expect the answer to cover both sides of the argument, presenting the for and the against, and giving a bit of detail and a concluding position, but it is clearly from one side of the argument. Apparently, voting to leave would create uncertainty and “potential economic disruption”. “Potential” leaves a little uncertainty. I think we have had definite economic disruption forever. Economies go up and they go down. Anyone who suggests that staying in a particular bubble will maintain some kind of economic stability has not been looking out of the window much.

Richard Drax: On that particular point, the leader of the opposition, Mr Rose, said there would be no change at all.

Mrs Trevelyan: My hon. Friend is right. It is always a little confusing when leaders of opposing camps in any election start to talk about the other side’s views. I hope that uncertainty and economic disruption will not be caused by Brexit. It is safe to say that we see much ahead of us that could cause that anyway.

The question of what happens if we leave is presented in the leaflet. What is not offered for those who have had the pleasure of having it through their door, or who have that pleasure still to come, is the question of what would voting to stay look like, since we know what would happen if we leave. It would ensure that we remain wedded with almost no influence, as several colleagues have already said. We are outwith the battered and struggling eurozone framework, but we are wedded to it. We are seeing Greek residents yet again put under unbearable financial strain so that EU bankers can circulate IMF money through Greece to ensure that the bankers do not come off too badly because of the euro chaos going on there. That is something we will definitely stay attached to in our uncontrolled sector outwith the eurozone, but that will cost us money. We will have to continue, as required, to bail out future eurozone crashes.

Jim Mellon, a successful entrepreneur who works across a large number of EU states, has made it clear—his forecasts, unlike the Treasury’s, have often been accurate—that the likely next crash of the euro, possibly a complete crash, will be within the next three years. It seems to me that voting to stay in will almost certainly ensure that we are wedded to a big bill over which we have little control, watching nations around us suffer even greater debt. The reality is that France’s and Italy’s debt balance sheet is pretty unsustainable. The chances are that the bill will be a lot bigger than just Greece’s costs. It is clear what will happen if we choose to stay.

The Government leaflet briefly suggests that we might strike a good deal in terms of trade with the EU if we were to leave, but it goes on to dismiss that as a pie-in-the-sky idea that is incredibly unlikely, because, somehow, there is no reason why a trade deal would be struck. The leaflet indicates that 8% of EU exports come to the UK and that 44% of UK exports go to the EU. That sounds terrible: 8% in, 44% out. That is a big imbalance, but let us look at that in real terms—my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) mentioned this earlier—and in the terms that businesses and those who make the exports and provide the services that we sell abroad would actually understand: the terms of money.

I am an accountant; percentages can be a useful way to present an issue, but also a useful way to create a level of dissimulation. There is a £67 billion deficit of goods and services this year.

Sammy Wilson: Does the hon. Lady accept that the argument about a trade deal is really a non-argument? The United States has no trade deal with the EU and yet sells billions of euros’ worth of goods every year to the EU. Trade occurs because people want to buy the goods and because the prices are competitive.

Mrs Trevelyan: Indeed. The hon. Gentleman anticipates my words.

On the numbers, there is real cash—real money—involved in selling and buying goods. I am not willing to brook the scaremongering message that businesses that sell us their products—all £67 billion of them—will want to stop doing so. It is said that the EU creates jobs and makes us money. None of that is true. The reality is that hard-working businessmen put their houses on the line to present an issue, but also a useful way to create a level

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The leaflet is frustrating. Not only is it biased, but it is unable to explain the reality of what trade means and how it might work, for better or worse, if we were to vote to leave on 23 June. At best, it is simply scurrilous. One of the real problems with the message about exports being key is that only about 5% or 6% of our businesses,
which are a very important part of our UK trade, actually export to the EU. In my constituency in north Northumberland, I have a large number of small businesses, very few of whom export at all. They mostly sell their goods to other UK citizens. Of those who do export, they export to all corners of the globe, not only to the EU. In fact, thanks to the Emirates airline that set up a Newcastle to Dubai route four years ago, many now trade in the middle east in a whole new world. We have opened up dramatic new markets thanks to one aeroplane that goes once a day. It has been a fascinating thing to see. The EU is not the be-all and end-all of trade.

Paul Scully: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Emirates airline is a really good example of a Dubai-based airline benefiting from the European open skies policy, despite, sufficiently enough, not being based in the EU?

Mrs Trevelyan: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. I agree entirely. The EU seems to have a propensity to believe that its status and existence is vital to everything else, but I am very pleased that business people around the world continue to override that and do what businesses do: create great new products and provide services that the whole world can reach and make use of.

My postbag has been heavily weighted by the views of businesses—before the leaflet arrived, but even more so after it arrived—overwhelmingly saying that being part of the EU has been hugely onerous, often adding enormous and unnecessary regulations that are not relevant or necessary because they do not trade in the EU. They add to costs, reduce productivity and often create frustrations in the day-to-day life of the businesses. Farmers, mackerel smokers, drone engineers and pastry producers are under more and more pressure from the EU, which has brought them unbelievable packaging regulations—and the weight of extra costs—that they would not need if we were not in the EU. They could trade with UK businesses and overseas global traders under a set of regulations that were sensible and financially viable, which would help their productivity to grow. If they continued to trade within the EU, no doubt they would be perfectly comfortable to meet whatever packaging and other requirements were needed for those markets.

In conclusion, the thing I found most frustrating about the leaflet—other than the fact that it was deeply depressing, presented only one side of the argument and managed to skew information in a way that anyone sitting an A-level would be chastised for because they were not presenting the facts as they should—was that £9.3 million is a lot of money in anyone’s book. I have a copy of the leaflet—I sent mine back to the Government have chosen to spend £9.3 million on this leaflet rather than finding one of the many ways to spend it to support those who put themselves in harm’s way to protect our nation. To suggest that war and genocide are the likely outcomes of voting to leave is insulting to our soldiers, sailors and airmen, and to every member of the British population who had to read such rubbish. I am sad for those yet to receive the leaflet who will do shortly.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) on such a brilliant introduction to the debate, and thank the many Members who have already spoken so well and so clearly. I shall not speak for long.

I have a copy of the leaflet—I sent mine back to the Prime Minister personally. As I said in an intervention earlier, I am delighted that I have the opportunity to speak about it before war breaks out and I am summoned. I am an ex-serviceman, my uniform is still hanging in the cupboard and I am ready to serve again, but I hope that we do not have to use armed force against our European allies. If they are allies and the EU state is so wonderful, as the Prime Minister and others believe, it is simply beyond me as to why one country’s leaving should cause war and genocide. The argument just does not stack up. As the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) and others have said, it is shameful that the Government are using such language.

When we hear from the Minister later, I am sure we will hear what we have heard from him before: a lot of—well, I cannot think of the appropriate word because he and I so fundamentally disagree. I wish this could be a light-hearted debate, I really do. I wish a sense of humour could be injected—although occasionally it is because the arguments for staying in are so farcical—but this is all about our country and its future. It is not about individual politicians or political legacies; it is about the future of our country and the freedom of the people who live in it. It is as simple as that. It is about our right to our own destiny and to guide our country in the direction we wish her to go.

On the back of the leaflet it says, “Protecting jobs”, and next to it is a tick. Tell that to half the members of the EU. They have huge rates of unemployment and are crippled by the euro and bankrupt. Italy was run by bureaucrats for a short period. Could that happen to us? The same people advised us to sell off the pound and join the euro. What an absolute disaster that would have been! One of the main reasons why our economy is potentially strong now is because we retained the pound. The leaflet also says, “A stronger economy”, with a tick. Again, tell that to the millions of people who are struggling to find work. It says, “Providing security”—security! Look at the evidence: civil unrest, terrorism, uncontrolled immigration and the rise of the left and the right. That is just what everyone feared all those years ago and, as has been mentioned, why so many millions died to keep us free. The EU is creating that same fear again because none of this makes sense.

I am staggered. I find it very difficult to comprehend how my party is in league with left-leaning parties, except for a few honourable exceptions. That is not to defame anyone for being on the left, right or centre, but it seems to me that the socialist-leaning parties want the EU to survive because it is a bureaucracy. Bureaucrats
run it and are paid God knows how much money, with pensions, huge offices and secretaries—the cost is astronomical—and they are unaccountable.

**Kate Hoey:** The hon. Gentleman mentioned EU pensions, which is something that really bugs me. There are all those Members in the House of Lords who have worked for the European Union as commissioners and so on and now have big pensions—really, they are signed up to never bringing the European Union into disrepute. Does he agree not only that they should have to declare an interest, which they do not, but that they should not be allowed to take part or vote in anything to do with the European Union? They are deeply committed to it because of their huge pensions and if they say anything wrong they might get that taken away.

**Richard Drax:** I agree with the hon. Lady. It certainly seems from those who have contributed to the debate so far that people are easily manipulated, or bought, or whatever. If the allegation is one of corruption, perhaps that is a bit strong, but certainly for ex-servicemen to speak out as they did is most unusual. Generals and highly respected people who have served this country should not be politicised. They should never have been asked to write that letter on behalf of the Government. It was an absolute disgrace. I have since spoken to one of the signatories, who shall remain nameless, and I have to say that I do not think he is particularly proud of signing that letter.

Let me return to the document. Interestingly, it has seven pictures. It does not have very many pages, but it has seven pictures: a calendar; a gentleman working on a bit of engineering; a basket of food; a ship; a “UK Border” sign; a family in the kitchen, washing up the breakfast, lunch or dinner; and a family walking down the street with a baby. You could not make this up. If you sat down and made a family walking down the street with a baby, you could not make this up. If the argument to stay in is so strong, why are these pages not full of facts trying to persuade people to stay in? The fact is that the Government do not have sufficient facts to fill this tiny, shabby leaflet.

**Mrs Main:** Is my hon. Friend as surprised as I am that there is no real image of what staying in looks like? There is absolutely no mention of the accession of Turkey. There is no mention that 70-odd million Turks will soon be able to be part of the European Union or that it is our official position to welcome and support Turkey. There is absolutely no mention of the accession of Turkey. There is no mention that there is no real image of what staying in looks like? That is a bit strong, but certainly for ex-servicemen to speak out as they did is most unusual. Generals and highly respected people who have served this country should not be politicised. They should never have been asked to write that letter on behalf of the Government.

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Regrettably, I think this document is a sham, a disgrace and a complete waste of taxpayers’ money. I am ashamed—the hon. Member for Vauxhall used that word, and I will too. I thought better of the in campaign. We are going to see more fear sprayed around the country in the ensuing days.

I will end on this note. I was enjoying a ride with a taxi driver the other day. When he learned what I did—to my relief, he did not press the ejector button at that point—he said, “Look, guv: in or out?” I said, “What do you think?” He said, “Just the very whiff of having our country back makes me feel proud.”

6.24 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): As has already been pointed out, the people of Northern Ireland have not yet been subjected to having to read the dodgy dossier that has been published by the Government. No one should be surprised that it is not an objective assessment of the case for staying in or leaving because, as a number of hon. Members said, the Government made up their mind at the outset that, regardless of what happened in the negotiations, they would put forward the case for remain. No doubt, when the leaflet eventually makes its way through the Royal Mail’s postbags to my constituents’ houses, they will treat it with contempt because they will know it is not an attempt to set out the facts and figures.

We have just finished the Assembly election campaign in Northern Ireland, and the question I was most commonly asked on the doorstep over the past three and a half weeks, even though it is nothing to do with the Assembly election, was, “Are you in or are you out?” From the conversations I have had with thousands of my constituents, I have absolutely no doubt which way they will be voting on 23 June.

The Government are desperate. We saw the degree of their desperation when the Prime Minister visited Northern Ireland at the beginning of this campaign. He brought together farmers and told them that their crops will die in the fields, that their bank balances will be slashed, that European money will end and that they will no longer be able to feed ourselves because of the disaster that will befall Northern Ireland if we drop out of the EU and no longer have the support of the CAP. He ignored the fact that, as most farmers know—a large part of my constituency is rural—EU support for agriculture in the United Kingdom has been falling because support is increasingly being directed towards eastern Europe, and that many small farmers are crippled by bureaucracy and the CAP’s requirements.

Of course, the Prime Minister pulled out the ultimate card: he said that somehow or other the peace process might be in jeopardy. I lived in Northern Ireland right through the troubles, and I never, ever heard any IRA spokesman say that he was determined to bomb the life out of people in Northern Ireland to stay in the EU. It was never an issue with republicans. Indeed, it is significant that, until it got embroiled in the politics of the Irish Republic, Sinn Féin used to be a very anti-EU party. Suddenly, because it wanted to curry favour with voters in the Republic, it decided that it was pro-EU. Saying that the peace process will somehow be in jeopardy is another scare tactic.

In Northern Ireland, whenever we get into trouble with the peace process, we can be sure that political leaders whose names the President of the United States has never heard before will get a telephone call from the White House. “Jimmy, how are you?”—I cannot do an American accent, so I will not even try—or, “Peter, how are you?” and the soft-soaping starts. It has been no different in this referendum campaign. The US cavalry has ridden to the rescue of General Cameron, who is making his last stand. I believe that he knows it is his last stand. He cannot convince the people of the United Kingdom to go into the reservation of the EU, so he has to bring in the American President to frighten them, but I think the American President’s ham-fisted attempt has not weakened but strengthened the leave campaign.

Many Members have already talked about the false arguments in this document, and I want to pick up on one or two of them: first, that the cost of living is going to go up. How do they justify that—on the basis, primarily, that the value of the pound will fall. However, our exchange rate goes up and down. We have a freely floating exchange rate mechanism, because we are not part of the euro. Our exchange rate goes up and down all the time. We live with the consequences of that: sometimes it helps our exporters and sometimes it is to the detriment of our exporters; sometimes it brings down the cost of living because imports become cheaper, and sometimes it puts the cost up—but that is what happens without a fixed exchange rate. Our membership of the EU will make no difference to that—but that is the main way in which the cost of living could increase, according to the Government leaflet.

We have had that reinforced by the Chancellor’s predictions and the Treasury’s model up to 2030. I taught economics at one stage and the one thing I know about economic models is that we do not rely on economic models on the economic models to tell us what is going to happen in 2030 when we are living in 2016. A Treasury model also told us that the deficit would be wiped out by now. The Treasury revises its estimates almost on a yearly basis, because economic models are subject to a whole range of assumptions. If we are looking 14 years in advance, how can we possibly know what parameters to put into an economic model? We are certainly not going to be able to tell people, “You are going to be £4,302.22 worse off,” which is what the Government want people to believe.

That is the first scare tactic. The second is the idea that people will not be able to go on their holidays any longer, they will have to get a visa to go to the sun and flights will cost more. For those who are concerned about carbon footprints, that would be a compelling argument, but it does not really play much with me. Again, that is based on what? The price of flights has come down not because of the EU, but because of people such as O’Leary, companies such as Ryanair and easyJet, and competition between airlines. That has nothing to do with the EU, yet it is rested at the EU’s door.

Next is the argument that millions of jobs will be lost because it is more difficult to get access to European markets. However, in my constituency, there are companies that do research for the pharmaceutical industry; one firm has 140 workers who research new drugs and, as a result, drugs worth £750 million are produced across Europe from the patents for which they are responsible.
Do people buy that information because we are part of the EU? No, they buy it because the research is good quality, and the drug has been tested and is capable of being marketed.

In my constituency, too, Schrader Electronics provides valves that tell drivers whether their tyres have gone down, without them having to look at them. The valves are sold to car manufacturers all over the European Union, as part of the supply chain. On 24 June, are those manufacturers likely to say that they will no longer buy the valves? Of course not, because the technology is good and the price is good. The company is part of the supply chain and will remain part of the supply chain.

For anyone who flies on an airplane, every third seat is made in Northern Ireland—anyone sitting on seats A or D is probably sitting on one. Why? Is it because we are part of the EU? No, it is because we have a manufacturer that produces a competitive product.

I could go on. People buy our goods for those reasons. All around the world, we sell goods to countries that we do not have trade deals with. So what about the idea that, if we left the EU, suddenly we would not get a trade deal with it? First, the supply chain would demand that the goods are bought anyway and, secondly, if the product is not competitive, people will stop buying, but if it is competitive, they will keep on buying. The argument is that it will take us years to negotiate a new trade deal. It will not, for the simple reason that, if firms want our products, they will continue to buy them.

On the last argument to be made, I have to say that the Prime Minister has been despicable today, invoking the war dead. It shows desperation to say that people died for the European Union, or for a united Europe. They died for a Europe free of dictatorship; they died for a democratic Europe. The whole essence of the EU is that it is not a democratic institution—some people do not even try to defend it as that any longer—and it is not an institution in which the will of the people is reflected in the decisions made; the will reflected is that of people who believe they know better than the elected politicians. The bureaucrats believe that they can develop an efficient system of government, free from those pesky politicians with their mad ideas and everything else. For the Prime Minister to invoke the war dead was an absolute disgrace.

We have seen the security argument, unfortunately, blown apart in Paris and Brussels. Terrorists, because of the Schengen arrangements and open borders, can wander around Europe like jihadic nomads, crossing borders, planning and plotting, and then killing. That is why we need to have control over our own borders. That is why we need to be out of an institution that leaves us open to that kind of terrorist activity.

I made an intervention about this earlier, but it is significant that the Government’s own document eulogises the fact that our special relationship with Europe enables us to opt out of and to distance ourselves from most of the major policies of the European Union. If there is a compelling argument, it is in the Government’s own document. We do not want to be part of the euro, because we have seen what it has done, the devastation that it has wrought across economies in European countries, the youth unemployment, and the way in which democratic institutions have been undermined in Italy and Greece as a result of the requirements to stay in the euro. Looking at the arguments in the document, we can also opt out of Schengen, another essential part of the EU.

By the way, the Government say that no country has been able to negotiate a trade agreement with the EU without allowing free access to labour. That is not true. Many countries outside the European Union trade freely with it, and they do not have to accept anyone and everyone who wants to move from EU countries to their country, but the document makes that claim—although the Government say that part of our special relationship is that we can opt out of that as well, and we can opt out of any other interference. If it is so good to be able to opt out of those policies, is it not even better to opt out of the EU altogether?

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Three people are standing, and I intend to call the Scottish National party spokesperson at 7 o’clock. People can do the arithmetic themselves.

6.39 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship in this important debate, Mr Stringer. I pay a special tribute to all Members who have taken part so far. I was particularly moved by the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax), which was powerful and sobering.

I am yet to find a constituent in Telford who thinks that the leaflet provides value for taxpayers’ money, yet the Prime Minister tells us that it is money well spent. The decision to spend £9 million-plus on a glossy leaflet, sent out 11 weeks before the referendum, sends unintended messages to voters about the EU. It tells us that the Government are willing to spend taxpayers’ money with no regard for the opinions of the people. It tells us that they are willing to waste taxpayers’ money, and it is fundamentally anti-democratic. No Government should spend public money to tell the people they govern how to vote and what to think.

We know that public opinion is divided on whether to leave or remain. It is about 50:50 at the moment, and that is why we are having a referendum. As I remind my local council from time to time, taxpayers’ money should not be used on publicity blitzes or vanity projects, and never to promote political ambitions.

Even those who think that a remain vote would be good for us and in our best interests have doubts about spending £9 million-plus on a leaflet. The BBC’s headline on 7 April was “Will anyone read £9m government leaflet?” Some may do, under duress, but I have to admit that I did not, despite receiving it three times. I read it only when I came to prepare for the debate. Anyone who has ever taken part in a political campaign knows that one glossy leaflet, sent 11 weeks before election day, will be passed over, sent off for recycling and completely forgotten about when the time comes to put an X in the box.

The public deserve and clearly want unbiased, neutral, factual information about the referendum. This is a big issue for our country. Why would we not want to hear both sides of the argument so that we can make up our minds for ourselves? The Minister—I greatly respect him for sitting here this afternoon and listening to what we have to say—may say that the leaflet was produced
because there was a thirst for information. The Government should recognise that the reason why there is a thirst for information is that they have not provided it. They have a duty and responsibility to give the public the facts, not just the account they want us to hear.

The leaflet was clearly designed to masquerade as a Government information leaflet, yet from a cursory glance at its contents we can see that it is nothing of the sort. We have been told that the Government are not neutral about our decision on whether to remain or leave. That is true, but the leaflet needed to make that point and not pretend to be factual public information from a neutral and unbiased perspective. For example, there is no recognition in the leaflet that the mutual self-interest of other members of the EU would ensure that a leave decision would be achieved with minimal disruption to existing trading arrangements. There is no comment on the challenges facing the EU, which are set out in the Five Presidents report. I am sure the Minister knows who those five important people are, but I did not until one constituent of mine described them to me as the five best reasons to leave the EU. I would like to name those five reasons: the President of the Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker; the President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz; the President of the Eurogroup, Jeroen Dijsselbloem; the President of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi; and the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk. Yes, those are five reasons—very expensive reasons—to leave the EU.

We, the British people, do not like being told what to do by self-important bureaucrats. We do not like being told what is in our best interests or what is good for us. This debate is about liberty, economic freedom and democracy, and if the £9 million leaflet did anything, it served to remind the British people why we cherish those ideals and what the EU is really about. Perhaps the leaflet did have some value after all, and perhaps not all of that £9 million was wasted.

6.44 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I do not want to give the Minister all the arguments about why we should remain in the EU or leave. Many of them are well known, and I am not sure that the debate is entirely about those arguments. I want to talk about fairness—that is what the debate is about. We all have strong views, and we could all give long speeches explaining why, in our view, the leaflet is wrong on a particular fact and is based on supposition. We could ask how, when the Treasury has difficulty in getting its own borrowing figures correct even for the next year, it can possibly foretell what will happen in five or 10 years or how exchange rates will move. We could go through the entire leaflet and tear it apart—no Back Bencher from the remain camp has bothered to come to the debate, which is faintly sinister from the point of view of fairness—but I am not sure that anything would be achieved by doing that. I want to concentrate on the argument about fairness.

The Minister will quite rightly say that the Government have a particular point of view and are constitutionally entitled to put that point of view. No one denies that, and no one denies that the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and the Minister for Europe can give whatever speeches they like, whether or not they agree with them. We all accept that. The Minister will no doubt also say that Governments have argued particular cases during past referendums, and all the rest of it.

We cannot deny that the Government have a settled view, although of course we should point out that we are in an unusual situation where several members of the Government have a completely different view, which should temper some of the rhetoric. The Government have a point of view, but our question is, what is the whole point of this referendum? Is the point not to draw a line under the debate so that both sides feel that they have had a fair crack of the whip, that both campaigns have broadly spent the same amount of money and had the same amount of airtime, that the arguments have been made and that the public have decided one way or the other? I say to the Government that even if they win, nothing will have been achieved if at the end of the campaign people feel a fundamental sense of unfairness and if one side—the remain side, with all its resources and backed by the Government, thousands of civil servants and so on—has had an undue advantage.

There is history in this debate, as I mentioned in my earlier intervention. I will quote John Mills, the Labour donor and deputy chair of Vote Leave, who was a national agent for the no campaign in the 1975 referendum. He wrote recently:

“We were deluged by propaganda heavily weighted in favour of the stay-in campaign. The total expenditure spending on advertising, leaflets, posters and all the other elements of the campaigns conducted on each side was roughly 10:1 in favour of staying in. This had a massive effect on public opinion and can’t have failed to have had a significant impact on the result. In the autumn of 1974, only 36 per cent of the population thought membership of the Common Market was ‘a good thing’. But by 1975, this figure had shot up to 50 per cent. It is very hard to believe that this huge increase in support for staying in was not largely down to the massive and disproportionate propaganda campaign waged by the pro-Common Market campaign.”

There is history in this debate.

Presumably, the remain campaign has come to the conclusion that it has to bombard the people and outspend the leave campaign. That is unfair. The remain campaign and the leave campaign are each allowed to raise £7 million. I actually talked to the Vote Leave campaign today about having a rally. I asked, “Can you organise a rally in Lincolnshire?” and the campaigners said, “Well, we’d rather you did it, because of course it comes out of our spending, which is very carefully controlled.” That is all fair enough. The leave campaign is limited to £7 million. The remain campaign will spend £7 million, and in addition the Government have produced a leaflet at the taxpayers’ expense for £9 million. That comes to £7 million plus £9 million on the remain side, compared with just £7 million on the leave side, which is fundamentally unfair. Surely the whole point about the British mentality and way of doing politics is that both sides get a fair crack of the whip. Is that not why we have such hugely careful spending controls in all our general election campaigns in our constituencies—because we feel that there is a right to put an argument, but taxpayers’ money should not be used to overwhelm the other side?

Perhaps I may make one comment about fairness. People are asking for a genuine debate. They want genuine information. Many people are still undecided.
If it were possible for the Government to help facilitate a genuine debate in which the arguments, facts and economics would be put, people would understand that, but they find it increasingly irritating that there seems to be a Government tendency to increase the war tempo of the rhetoric—there has been the latest claim today, of course. If the result of leaving would be so utterly disastrous for peace, the economy and all the rest of it, why are we having the referendum in the first place? Why did the Prime Minister risk it? Why did he say during his negotiations that he was prepared to consider recommending that we should leave if he did not get his demands, which we know were about only minor changes on migration? Now he says that leaving would have a devastating result on the economy, the prospects for war or peace in Europe, and many other things. Why did he risk all that? Why did the Foreign Secretary say during the negotiations that he was prepared to consider leaving, whereas apparently he now says that leaving would be a disaster?

I say to the Government, by all means put the arguments—no one is criticising them for doing that; they are the duly elected Government and have a right to do it—but just try to be fair, and do not try to overwhelm the opposition with taxpayers’ money. That is what other Governments have done, in places such as eastern Europe. That is what the Council of Europe is all about, and it is why we had the debate on purdah. I know the Minister will say that he made it perfectly clear that purdah would apply only for the last 28 days. We understand all those arguments, but was not the reason for that debate our wish to make it clear that the Government should not misuse their massive power and resources to overwhelm the opposition? If the Government win on that basis it will be a dirty victory, and will not close down the debate. I also believe that it is counterproductive for the Government in their campaign, and will not win the debate; that is what we do by convention.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be called to speak, albeit late, in this well attended, though I must say one-sided debate. I ask right hon. and hon. Members to spare a thought for my right hon. Friend the Minister. He reminds me of one of those renaissance pictures of St Sebastian, who stands tethered to a tree, his body pierced by a multitude of arrows shot by myriad archers. He has been called on many times to defend the Government’s handling of the referendum process. Today he seeks to defend the frankly shabby piece of disinformation posing as an informative leaflet, which has been comprehensively shredded, metaphorically, by the participants in the debate, just as it has no doubt been physically shredded by many of the people who had the unfortunate experience of finding it dropping through their letter box.

The arguments have been advanced and I do not want to repeat them, but there is one point that I want to touch on as a Welsh Member of Parliament, which is the timing of the leaflet. As the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) pointed out, the leaflets have not yet been delivered in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, because the Government wanted to avoid a clash with the elections that took place last Thursday. In England, of course, they were distributed between 11 April and 13 April, which was before the regulated period of the referendum campaign began. In Wales, they will be distributed this week, as they will in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

I have to tell my right hon. Friend the Minister that the timing had no effect whatever on the Welsh Assembly election campaign, because I had exactly the same experience as the hon. Member for East Antrim. Everywhere I went when I was canvassing in that campaign, I found that very few people wanted to talk about the Assembly election, but everyone wanted to talk about the referendum. In particular they were incensed at the fact that the Government had spent £9.3 million of their money—taxpayers’ money—on a piece of propaganda.

The practical effect is that the leaflets will be delivered in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales squarely during the regulated period, which I suggest will give the remain campaign an unfair advantage. During that time, expenditure is carefully regulated and limited. The Government are not affected by those limitations of course, but in any event the remain campaign’s expenditure will be augmented by the delivery of the leaflet through people’s letterboxes. That is deeply regrettable, and the Electoral Commission has pointed out that after the Scottish referendum it recommended that Governments should not conduct any taxpayer-funded advertising during the regulated period. That is what has happened in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

I suggest that the Government should have had regard to the Venice Commission’s code of good practice on referendums, which provides: “The use of public funds...for campaigning purposes must be prohibited” and states that any explanatory report produced by the authorities should “give a balanced presentation not only of the viewpoint of the executive and legislative authorities or persons sharing their viewpoint but also of the opposing one.”

The Government’s document is completely silent in that regard. The leaflet clearly contravenes those recommendations. It is utterly one-sided.

As a Conservative Member of Parliament I am bound to say that I find it highly regrettable that my party’s Government has conducted itself in that way. I would go so far as to say that I am deeply ashamed. The fact that so many people have signed the e-petition, which no doubt is at somewhere around the 220,000 signature mark by now, is a clear sign that my concern, and the concern of so many other hon. Members who have spoken this afternoon, is shared widely by the British people. It has been an unfortunate episode in an unfortunate campaign, and I hope that on reflection my right hon. Friend the Minister will find it in his heart to apologise for what the Government have done.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Before I call the Scottish National party spokesperson, I remind the House that there is approximately 10 minutes for each Front-Bench speaker. Perhaps the Minister will leave two minutes at the end for the mover of the motion to respond to the debate; that is what we do by convention.
Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I wish you and all other colleagues here a happy Europe Day. Mr Stringer—of course, that has yet to come up in the debate. I particularly wish the Minister a happy Europe Day. When I attend debates such as this I seem to be in the unusual situation of being one of the friendlier faces he encounters. That is a sad state of affairs indeed, but he will be glad to learn that I have brought reinforcements, who are also champions of the remain campaign. Indeed, my hon. Friends the Members for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) have just returned from a visit to Brussels, where my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) made a strong case for remaining part of the European Union. The Scottish National party is helping where others are not at the moment.

Today’s debate, like the broader debate, appears to have a lot more to do with Conservative in-fighting than with the future of the European Union or the European debate. Indeed, some of the language used today has been rather intemperate and unfortunate. Of course, the leaflet is not yet for viewers in Scotland, Northern Ireland or Wales; I have no doubt we will get ours soon. We have just come through an important election period when we have been discussing issues such as education, transport, local government and our health service. I wonder whether we should take the opportunity to press the reset button on this particular debate now that we have come through those elections.

We would like to hear some positive remarks. The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) threatened to grind government to a halt over the leaflet. He also made reference to the armada. Of course, some historians think the armada set forth as a direct result of the execution of Mary Queen of Scots. We have talked about the royal family, and Mary Queen of Scots’ forebears could not be any more European. [Interruption.] We have a monarch on the throne at the moment who is descended from Germans and married to a Greek-Danish prince. You cannot get a lot more European than that.

Mrs Trevelyan: The key point that I have probably had to reiterate more than any other is that there is Europe, and then there is the EU. The EU is a political construct. Europe is a geographical construct made up of many countries, some of which are in the EU and some of which are not. To continue to misuse the two terms is to treat the Great British public as stupid. They understand clearly the difference between the two.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the hon. Lady. She will be glad to hear that we will not be putting the fact that the Queen is married to a Danish-Greek prince at the heart of our campaign. We will be putting at the heart of our campaign the fact that the European Union makes us greener, wealthier, fairer and safer.

Fundamentally, we need to think about questions of fairness. That was reflected in the amendments that SNP Members tabled to the European Union Referendum Bill. I see in the Chamber Opposition and Government Members who backed some of those amendments—they were unsuccessful, but we are getting used to that in this place. We tabled those amendments because fairness has to be at the heart of this debate.
be entirely consistent, should he not also complain during this referendum campaign? I am looking for consistency.

Stephen Gethins: The Scottish Government did produce a leaflet, and the Scotland Office, under the Conservative party, also produced a leaflet that was sent to every house. The hon. Gentleman should raise that issue with his Government’s Minister. Our leaflet was downloaded 100,000 times.

Since the hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the Scottish independence referendum, let us look at it. There was an 85% turnout—I wonder whether the Minister thinks this referendum will reach that—with 16 and 17-year-olds engaged in politics and taking part, and in a study conducted afterwards there was a 95% satisfaction rating with how the referendum was carried out.

Tom Pursglove: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Gentleman will be interested in this point, so I will round off with it: it was not bad for our poll numbers either, as last week’s election demonstrated.

7.6 pm

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): We are here to state the merits of a petition that I understand was started by Jayne Adye, who is the director of the Get Britain Out campaign. She is therefore not a disinterested person who is independent of the issue or whose only concern, as the petition claims, is about the spending of public money.

We need to be honest about what this debate is about. It is yet another example of the wider leave campaign wanting to talk about process and not the real issues. I do not have a problem with that, but let us not pretend that this is about a leaflet issued by the Government. The faux outrage is intended to drown out the arguments made in the leaflet. I very much doubt that the director of the Get Britain Out campaign would have raised a petition if the Government were spending taxpayers’ money on a leaflet arguing that we should leave.

John Redwood: Has the hon. Lady been listening to the debate? Colleague after colleague has stood up and pointed out that the leaflet is simply wrong and misleading, because we care passionately about getting back democratic accountability and control for the British people.

Pat Glass: As the right hon. Gentleman said, I have sat through almost three hours of the debate very politely and courteously and listened to all of the arguments.

If we are going to do this, we should get it right. This is a small issue, but the petition talks about the Government spending “money on biased campaigning to keep Britain inside the European Union” and about the “Great British Public”. If we want to get this right, we must talk about the UK, not Britain. Britain is the island; the UK is much wider than that. I am sure that it was not the intention of the campaigners to cut out an entire country and all of the people of Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, let us get it right.

Kate Hoey: I thank my hon. Friend for that very important point. Does she not squirm at the fact that her campaign to remain is called “Britain Stronger in Europe”?

Pat Glass: It is not. It is called “Labour In for Britain”. I am part of a Labour campaign. As far as I can see, the leaflet is entirely legal. It has been issued by the Government well in advance of the last 28 days of the referendum period, when section 125 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 will apply and restrict publications about the referendum by bodies or persons that are wholly or mainly publicly funded. The leaflet represents the official view of the Government on the biggest decision that this country will make in a generation and which will impact on this country and our neighbours for decades. In my view, it would be unacceptable for the Government not to have a view on that and not to share that view with the people of this country.

Ms Gisela Stuart: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Pat Glass: No. As has been pointed out, we have had a huge debate, but we have heard one side of the argument. Hon. Members should do me the courtesy of allowing me to give the other side of the argument.

It seems perfectly reasonable to me for the Government of the day to set out their position in the referendum. This is not a precedent; it is exactly what Governments have done before. This leaflet is clear, and the title is not misleading. It seems to me, and no doubt to those watching the debate today, that those challenging the leaflet are hoping to silence the arguments contained in it, rather than discussing the merits of issuing a leaflet or the cost.

We know that, on this issue, the Labour party—I expect to get one or two requests for an intervention here—is largely of one voice. A handful of my colleagues—I think it is five altogether—have long-held and deep-set views on the issue, and I absolutely respect that, but I think they are mistaken, and they would certainly have to agree that they are out of step with the vast majority of the parliamentary Labour party, constituency Labour parties and Labour voters. The Conservative party, however, is split on the issue. Let us look at the facts. We have a parliamentary Labour party pro-EU group. That group has 214 members.

Tom Pursglove: Where are they?

Pat Glass: I will come on to that in a moment. They include all of the leadership and all of the shadow Cabinet. On this one issue at least, in comparison with Government Members, we look like an old married couple.

I have sat here throughout the debate and listened to the arguments, and some good arguments have been made. I absolutely accept some of the arguments made by the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) about fairness. However, I was hoping that, in almost three hours, I would have heard what “out” looks like in terms of jobs, consumers and the environment. What would it look like for women and young people and for our future security? I have not heard any of that.
What I have heard is that it will be all right on the night. Even the leading Brexit economist now says that an EU exit would kill off our manufacturing sector.

As someone from the north-east, I was surprised at what was said by the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), who is not listening at the moment. We are the only region in the country that has a trade surplus. We are a manufacturing region, and hundreds of thousands of jobs depend on our being part of the European Union. Leaving the EU would be a disaster for regions such as mine. I understand what the hon. Lady says about one Emirates flight out of Newcastle airport every day, but that cannot compare to the hundreds of thousands of cars that we export from the north-east to the European Union.

In the leaflet, the Government make a clear recommendation to the people of the UK that they judge it to be in our national interest to remain a member of the European Union. For once, I agree with them. The Cabinet Office has told us that independent polling shows that 85% of voters are seeking more information on which to make an informed decision. That supports what I am finding on the doorstep. When I talk to people, they are clear that this is not their No. 1 priority at the moment. However, they know it is important and they want the facts on which to make a decision.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), I apologise for arriving late. I was stuck on a Eurostar train or I might have wanted to make a speech in the debate. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is a great pity that the referendum is taking place among the citizenry who are the least well informed in the whole of the European Union about what the European Union actually does? Is she concerned, as I am, that whatever the result is, it might not be the result of an informed electorate, and that cannot be good for democracy?

**Pat Glass**: Governments of both colours, over the last 41 years, have failed to make the case for the European Union; they have failed to make it real for real people’s lives. That is part of the problem: we have had 41 years of one side of the argument. It is not unreasonable that we should now start to see some of the other side of the argument.

The leaflet has cost £9.3 million, which is equivalent, we are told, to 34p per household. The official in and out campaigns will each receive £15 million and a higher spending limit of £7 million each. The use of public rooms and a public grant of up to £600,000 in order to make their case to the people of the UK, so the cost of the leaflet will presumably not now be the issue. Presumably there will now be another petition, asking us not to spend £15 million on each side and provide the access to public rooms and so on if the issue is really the spending of public money.

My understanding from talking to people who have received the leaflet is that it has certainly caused debate and a thirst for further information. The hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) said that he had received 476 complaints about the leaflet, and I do not doubt that for a moment, but I have received two complaints from constituents about it. In the past four weeks, I have received almost 500 contacts and complaints from constituents about tax havens in UK dependencies and overseas territories. I have actually received more complaints from constituents about the degrading quality of modern bricks than about the leaflet. That shows that it is a much greater issue among different people and in different parts of the country. My reading of the situation on the doorstep is that there is a public thirst for information. The public want a debate on the facts, and they do not want a debate on a leaflet that has been sent out already in England. One thing that I hope we can all agree on is that at least the leaflet encourages everyone to be registered to vote—everyone should take part in this far-reaching referendum. No one can say that this issue does not affect them.

I want to refer to this fact sheet. Full Fact contacted every Member of Parliament in advance of the debate—I have no reason to think it contacted only me. Having checked the leaflet, Full Fact says, in summary:

“...The government explicitly states that the leaflet is arguing for the UK remaining in the EU. So it is not attempting to be even-handed...Given that, much of the leaflet is accurate and the government deserves some credit for ensuring that it was published with details of the sources, making it easier for...people to “judge independently.”

Finally, I simply want to set out Labour’s case for remaining in the EU. It is a simple case. We believe that for jobs, growth, investment and security reasons, we are better off in the European Union. We believe that, for the protection of the workers of the UK and for environmental reasons, the UK is better off in Europe. We believe that we are safer in an increasingly unsafe world if we are part of a strong economic group of 520 million people. We believe that the people of Europe can tackle those big issues that do not recognise borders and that threaten our future—climate change, international terrorism and global tax avoidance—only if we do so together.
Mr Lidington: I am sorry, but there was a collective Cabinet decision. There are and always have been—for as long as I have been in politics—honourable, sincerely held differences of opinion within our party and within the Labour party about the European question. The Prime Minister therefore said that, on this issue and this issue alone, he would relax the normal rules by which Ministers are obliged to support the collective Government position without question and that those Ministers would, in a personal capacity, be able to express their dissenting views.

Ms Gisela Stuart: I am happy for the Minister to write to me on this point. As he places significant importance on the Government’s website, can he tell me where, as of today, I can find certain quotations by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer? As recently as four months ago, they said that we would be perfectly alright outside the EU, but those quotations have disappeared from the website.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady does not have to search through the Government website. She can look at Hansard and will see that my right hon. Friends have, on many occasions, said that the United Kingdom could survive outside the EU. However, the question that faces the electorate in the referendum is whether remaining in the EU or leaving the EU is the best outcome for our prosperity and security. It is my contention, and the Government’s contention, that the economic and political interests of the UK and all its people are best served by continuing to remain as active and leading players in the primary international organisation on the continent of Europe.

The leaflet follows precedent from previous referendums, including that on EU membership in 1975, when a Government leaflet was also distributed. It also follows the precedent of the referendums on the creation of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly in 1997 and on the creation of the mayoral system in London in 1998, and of two Government leaflets during the Scottish referendum in 2014. Government publications of this sort, including the distribution of the leaflet, are entirely lawful. However, I can confirm that, as set out in section 125 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, special rules limiting Government publications of all kinds will apply during the last 28 days of the referendum campaign.

Mr Lidington: I will give way, but I am very conscious of the need to leave time for my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) to reply.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady does not have to search through the Government website. She can look at Hansard and will see that my right hon. Friends have, on many occasions, said that the United Kingdom could survive outside the EU. However, the question that faces the electorate in the referendum is whether remaining in the EU or leaving the EU is the best outcome for our prosperity and security. It is my contention, and the Government’s contention, that the economic and political interests of the UK and all its people are best served by continuing to remain as active and leading players in the primary international organisation on the continent of Europe.

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Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Lidington: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I want to allow time for our hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam to reply.

Mr Lidington: The truth is that the UK is a European power with global interests, and Europe matters to our prosperity and security. Decisions taken in Europe will affect us, whether we are out or in. I want the Ministers of this country to be at the table, leading the debates, shaping the rules, and deciding the arrangements through which we trade and how we operate in the world. We should not be outside the door waiting for others to sew something up and tell us what they have decided that affects us.

We know at least that the leave campaign believes that we should withdraw from the single market as part of departure from the EU. That would put at risk not only the current tariff-free trading environment, but the enormous reduction in—and, in many cases, elimination of—non-tariff barriers that have proved to be one of the key advantages to British industry of EU membership.

As the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) mentioned, one of the leading gurus of the leave campaign, Professor Minford, has said publicly that we
[Mr Lidington]

could expect to lose our manufacturing sector if we leave the EU, and that we should not be scared of that prospect. For people who have spent their lives working in the manufacturing industry or hope for jobs in manufacturing businesses, that would be a very alarming prediction indeed. It is little wonder that all the major business organisations report that a decisive majority, and in some cases, an overwhelming majority, of their members want to remain in the EU. That applies whether we are talking about the Confederation of British Industry, the EEF, the Federation of Small Businesses, the British Chambers of Commerce, the Institute of Directors, the National Farmers Union or TheCityUK.

Those who argue that we should be unconcerned about security risks ignore the opportunities that membership gives us. We have played a key part in successful European initiatives to defeat piracy in the Indian ocean, to reconcile Serbia and Kosovo, to train the military in Mali and to impose sanctions that brought Iran to the nuclear negotiating table. We would be foolish to throw that away. I am confident in the ability of our country to continue to set the agenda. We should not look inward. We should not retreat to isolation. We should go ahead and help to shape the direction of the continent of which we are, and will remain, a part.

7.29 pm

Paul Scully: I pay tribute to Jayne Adye and the many people who signed the petition, including the 340 constituents of the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass). They may not have complained to her, but they signed the petition none the less. The establishment are circling the wagons so, no matter where we shoot, we can hit something. We need a fair and free debate from this moment on.

Question negatived.

7.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Commonwealth War Graves Commission

1.30 pm

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter, and to see the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Tracey Crouch), who is away on maternity leave.

The aim of this short debate is to draw to the attention of colleagues and the public the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Apart from the maintenance of war cemeteries and memorials of two world wars, the commission is crucial to all the commemorative ceremonies for the first world war. I should declare an interest at the outset: I am one of two parliamentary commissioners represented on the commission. The other is the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who is in the Chamber and hopes to catch your eye, Mr Streeter.

In many respects, we are enclosed by history. Today, for example, at this very moment 76 years ago, the Labour party, meeting in conference, was deciding whether or not to support Winston Churchill as the leader of a coalition Government. One can imagine the atmosphere among parliamentary colleagues on 10 May 1940, with Nazi armies invading the low countries and France. We are here to look at another anniversary. Almost 99 years ago, on 21 May 1917, the Imperial War Graves Commission, as it was called then, received its royal charter, which established its remit and gave it sole responsibility for graves and memorials to the then dead of the imperial British forces in the first world war.

Nothing was preordained about the establishment of what became the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Its creation was largely the work of a formidable, motivated man called Fabian Ware—a man who had been working with Lord Milner in South Africa, who was an intellectual, who became editor of The Morning Post and who had a wide range of friends and contacts in the British establishment. In 1914, too old to serve, Ware commanded an ambulance unit in France and became aware of the sheer numbers of casualties, on a scale that Britain had never faced before. The British armed forces lost approximately 3,500 men at the battle of Waterloo—one of our biggest losses. We had suffered about 80,000 casualties by Christmas 1914.

Ware was concerned about what was going to happen to the dead, and he persuaded the general headquarters of the British armed forces in 1915 to establish the Graves Registration Commission, which he was to run. He made certain that the dead were buried or commemorated as near as possible to the battlefields where they fell and, most significantly, not repatriated. There was enormous pressure, particularly from the parents or families of reasonably wealthy people, to bring—where they could be found—the bodies of their sons, husbands or cousins back home. That was going to be impossible on such a scale. He was only too aware that many of the dead, when they could be found, had no means of identity whatsoever.

During the course of the first world war, and in the establishment of the royal charter, Ware negotiated with allied and enemy countries for land where the dead were to be buried. Most significantly of all, he established that there was going to be no distinction by rank. Crudely speaking, pre-Victorian army officers got individual burials; other ranks were dumped in a great big pit. The only distinction was going to be by religion—Christian, Jewish or Islamic. That would be marked on the headstone. Of course, those of the Islamic faith would have their own cemeteries carefully laid out.

There was a lot of opposition to that, mainly from the families, and there were heated debates here in Parliament at the end of the first world war. Ware outmanoeuvred them all. In the establishment of what we all know now as the cemeteries and memorials that are so distinguishable for the British and Commonwealth experience, he used a whole series of distinguished experts: Edward Lutyens; Herbert Baker; Reginald Blomfield; Rudyard Kipling, who had lost a son, Jack, and was deeply traumatised, and who established much of the terminology of the commemoration; and Joseph Jekyll, who advised on the landscaping and the gardens.

The final thing I will say about Ware is that he placed a great deal of emphasis on the fact that it was the Imperial—we would now say Commonwealth—War Graves Commission. It was not just about the British; it was about the Australians, the New Zealanders, the Canadians, the South Africans and, above all, the Indians, who made the biggest commitment to our cause in two world wars. I am part of the commission, and our work today is supported by member Governments of Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa and, above all, the United Kingdom. Each of those countries contributes a sum in proportion to the number of graves it has. The United Kingdom contributes 78%, which comes from the budget of the Ministry of Defence. The annual budget is approximately £70 million, which works out at roughly £40 per commemoration per annum.

I pay tribute to the dedication and commitment of the commission’s approximately 1,300 staff—most of them gardeners and masons, and most of them locally employed—who care for this vast range of memorials and gardens. Many of them are the second or third generation who have worked for the commission. Many of them continued to maintain those sites under the most appalling difficulties in the second world war, and more recently in war zones. I will come to that in a minute.

The work of the commission is vast. We commemorate 1.7 million individuals and maintain their graves and memorials at more than 23,000 locations in 154 countries across the globe. That is a vast scale. We also have to pay tribute to the host countries. Some, such as Belgium and France, willingly gave land. Others are the inheritors of the old British and French empires. We have to imagine, at times, how we would feel if we had vast cemeteries within our constituencies of Egyptian, Iraqi
or Nigerian graves from a war that had been fought over our territory. There is an important sensitivity here.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): My right hon. Friend rightly references the symbolism and sensitivity of some of those cemeteries. There is also the extraordinary Commonwealth war graves cemetery in Gaza, which I think I am right in saying has been tended by the same Palestinian family since it was put up, now presumably almost 80 years ago. It contains Christian, Muslim, Jewish and even Hindu memorials. It occupies a large amount of land in a tiny place that is very short of space. During Operation Cast Lead, an Israeli tank broke through the walls and damaged some grave stones. Eventually, construction materials were allowed back there, and the first thing they were used for was the reparation of those grave stones. It is a great testament to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which he serves so well.

Mr Simpson: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, which leads on to the fact that, even as we speak, the commission is working in Iraq—it used to be able to work in Syria—rebuilding cemeteries that have been destroyed by either war or ISIL/Daesh extremists, who see them merely as symbols of Christian occupation.

Indeed—if I may use what the Army used to call a visual aid—I have two photographs taken in Beirut. The first, from the 1980s, is of the cemetery almost completely destroyed; the second is of the cemetery lovingly rebuilt to the previous standard. We should remember, as I am sure all colleagues do, that at the end of the day we are dealing with individuals, either with a known grave or with their names on a giant memorial like those at Ypres or Thiepval. The memorials are for the families and also, now, for people who merely have an interest—I know that many colleagues have, they know it is not just about the families and also, now, for people who merely have an interest—I know that many colleagues are fascinated by the people behind the names.

We should also remember—in the words of Michael Caine, not a lot of people know this—that more than 300,000 Commonwealth servicemen and women who died in the two world wars are commemorated here in the United Kingdom. Their 170,000 graves are to be found at over 13,000 locations. In addition, some 130,000 missing Navy, Merchant Navy and Air Force casualties are commemorated on the great memorials at Chatham, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Tower Hill and Runnymede. A forgotten element is that nearly 30,000 men and women of the Merchant Navy, unsung heroes and heroines, were killed. Most naval people, of course, have no known grave.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): May I commend the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission at Shorncliffe military cemetery just outside Folkestone? It contains the graves of 550 servicemen. Of those, 471 are from the first world war and 300 are the graves of Canadian servicemen. The Canadians’ sacrifice is commemorated by the people of Folkestone on Canada day every year.

Mr Simpson: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The old military historian in me makes me think that the Canadians are the least boastful of the British empire and Commonwealth contributors to the two world wars. We tend to forget that one in four members of Bomber Command were Canadians and that most British Army battalions in Normandy had Canadian officers and NCOs on loan because we were so short of experienced people.

Here the commission is trying to do a lot of education through local communities and schools. Many of the 130,000 people who are remembered in the United Kingdom are not in major cemeteries. Sometimes they are at the end of a municipal cemetery, but many are in the cemeteries of largely Church of England graveyards. For example, my county, Norfolk, has 471 graves from two world wars and my market town of Reepham has three graves, two from 1918 of Reepham-born soldiers, who probably died from Spanish influenza, and one from 1941 of an RAF volunteer reserve sergeant from Great Yarmouth.

I commend the commission, which, over the last five or six years, has established a really superb website, which is idiot-proof. I am an analogue man, as my son frequently reminds me, but I can use it. People can look there for individuals and locations, and it is possible for colleagues who are interested to trace people who may be buried in their constituencies.

The commission is supported by the United Kingdom Government. I pay tribute to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. We have to work closely with the Department to help to deliver on many of the anniversaries—for example, the Jutland anniversary at the end of this month and that of the battle of the Somme at the enormous memorial at Thiepval at the beginning of July. The commission provides equal support to our Commonwealth friends in Australia and New Zealand who served at Gallipoli, our Canadian friends who served at Vimy ridge and our Indian friends who served on the western front.

The commission goes out of its way to provide a high-level service all year round. Because people are impressed by the quality of that service, maintaining it is very arduous. People expect to go to a cemetery and to see the lawns beautifully tended with all the horticulture laid out. There is a massive programme to replace some 12,000 individual gravestones a year as they are degraded by wind, weather, sand and sometimes military action.

We will shortly remember two big battles. One is Jutland at the end of this month. The memorials to Jutland are on land, although the overwhelming majority of seamen who died went down with their ships. Some were injured and brought to the United Kingdom but died in hospital. There is the memorial at Thiepval for the battle of the Somme. The ceremonies on 1 July are but the entrée—the battle lasted another three to four months. It is symbolic because that was the day people think the British Army suffered its greatest losses: some 19,000 men were killed in action and another nearly 40,000 wounded. In fact, we suffered worse casualties on 21 March 1918 when the Germans broke through, but that has been lost as part of our memory.

When people go to look at the Somme cemeteries, as many colleagues have, they know it is not just about the individuals who are buried there; it is about the reflection of British and empire society at the time. People look at the regimental cap badges and the memorials to the Canadians, the Australians and the New Zealanders. The overwhelming number of soldiers who served on the Somme were volunteers, either pre-war regulars or
Territorials. A number, not all, were in pais battalions. They were recruited from factories and businesses in Sheffield, Exeter, Glasgow and Liverpool and wore those parochial British badges with great honour. It is important that the commission delivers the best quality of remembrance at the commemorations, recognising that its cemeteries and memorials are usually the centrepiece for the commemorations that follow.

The commission is doing a lot of continuous work dealing with what we call the memories of forgotten soldiers, particularly and rightly, the role of the Indian armed forces in two world wars. A pilot project, “India Remembers”, is important not only in its own right but because we are only too well aware that young people under 18 may not know what happened. I remember the first world war, not that I was there; my two grandfathers talked to me about it. However, if you are 18, it is as far away as the wars of the roses. We must recognise that many children from the Indian subcontinent whose parents now live in the United Kingdom are detached from the contribution of the Indian armed forces in two world wars, not least because those forces were seen as much as a weapon of repression as armed forces defending democracy. A lot of work is rightly going into recognising that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission does not take a view on the interpretation of history. It tries to present the facts and the opportunities for others to look at.

Behind every headstone and name on a memorial is a person. I was lucky enough, in the early 1970s, to be able to go on visits with first world war veterans and then, in the late ’70s, ’80s and ’90s, with second world war veterans. When I was working with the British Army, it used battlefield tours—or, as they were known, battlefield tours—as a teaching method. One that I have never forgotten was to Normandy in 1995-96, when we took a whole series of middle-ranking young, thrusting Army officers on a battlefield study of the breakout from Normandy. We had two veterans with us. Major Bill Close, MC, was a pre-war private soldier, commissioned on the field of battle, who participated in Operation Goodwood, the attempt to break out through the German lines at Caen. At the time of the visit, he was aged about 88. Also with us was Oberstleutnant Freiherr Hans von Luck, who had been commanding a Panzer Grenadier regiment and trying to kill Bill Close outside Caen.

The most moving aspect was when we took those two old gentlemen, first, to the British Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery. Bill Close stood in front of the graves of his tank crew, who had been brewed up—11 tanks were brewed up under him in the course of the second world war—and we could see that he was looking not at gravestones, but at men’s faces. Half an hour later, we went to the German cemetery, where Hans von Luck stood in front of the grave of his adjutant, whose wedding he had been to in Paris; he was recalled to arms when the allies attacked. Once again, he was looking at that.

I therefore commend the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Frequently, its staff are the worker bees. I know that they are appreciated by hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens, but I thought it right and proper that we should draw attention to the work of the commission at this time of anniversaries.

1.51 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and my position as chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group.

I join the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) in praising the work of the employees of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, but I also want to touch on some current issues. As the right hon. Gentleman said, the commission cares for the graves of 1.7 million casualties of the first and second world wars in cemeteries and memorials at more than 23,000 locations in more than 150 countries; two of them are in my constituency of Glasgow South West. It employs just over 1,300 staff worldwide, and approximately 250 of those are on UK-based contracts. I understand that negotiations are ongoing with the Ministry of Defence to include non-war-related graves in the work of the commission.

The staff of the commission take pride in attending to the war graves. It is not just a job, but a way of life—a vocation. Many are from families who have worked for the commission for generations, and many spend their whole working lives in the service of the commission. Jobs at the commission range from gardeners, maintenance people and stonemasons to administrators, supervisors, managers, archivists and historians. It is not uncommon for staff to progress through a variety of those roles in the course of their career, retraining and adapting as necessary to the needs of the job. There is often a large element of foreign travel; indeed, the work often entails working and living abroad for years and even decades. That requires staff to uproot families and learn new languages in order to adjust. That can also have a financial impact if spouses are unable to pursue careers as a result.

Salaries at the commission have been very modest. That was recognised in the recent global grading and pay review, which found a need to uprate salaries. Although that is welcome, it nevertheless reflects the fact that salaries over the years have not been commensurate with the job. However, despite some of the sacrifices, staff at the commission remain committed to delivering a high level of service. Most recently, the first world war commemorations, as touched on by the right hon. Member for Broadland, have required staff to work over and above their normal commitments. However, that commitment has, in the view of many staff, not been rewarded.

Long-serving staff have seen the closure of the final salary pension scheme in April 2016 and a dramatic reduction in their pensions as a result. Trade unions are in the midst of pay negotiations with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and argue that staff should get an enhanced pay offer to take into account the special circumstance that staff have been put in this year. The Public and Commercial Services Union requested that the CEO of the commission meet Ministers to make that case, and the union offered to lend assistance.

Considering the considerable loyalty and commitment of staff, the downgrading of their pensions and the extra pension contributions that they will be paying this year, it had been hoped that they would receive a decent
pay offer as some form of compensation. Instead, it seems that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is relying on, and exploiting, the good will of staff.

To recognise the special nature of the job, the loyalty of staff and the financial sacrifices that staff have made over the years, the commission had a final salary pension scheme, ensuring financial security in retirement for staff who had spent their lives in dedicated service to the commission. The terms of the scheme were good, with a low employee contribution, a spouse’s pension, a death in service benefit and lump sums based on final salary; it was a 40/60ths scheme. That reflected the fact that the pension had traditionally been one of the most important conditions of service, recognising years of dedication and loyalty.

The effects on the staff of the decision to close the final salary scheme should not be underestimated. Long-serving staff have put up with great sacrifice and disturbance to their family lives, such as having to move to foreign countries. Spouses and partners have often been unable to have careers as a result. The pension that staff accrue should recognise that.

Approximately 60% of those affected by the changes are 50 years old or over and likely to retire in the next 10 years. Staff within a few years of retirement now have little time to adjust their financial planning for retirement, as the alternative group pension plan will not deliver anything like the benefits of the final salary scheme. The closure of that scheme will cause significant detriment to the future pensions of UK-based staff and will cause considerable unrest among employees at a time when all employees are working hard to further enhance the reputation of the commission with the work on the 1914-18 centenary commemorations. That approach of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission seems to have been mirrored in recent pay talks, in which it has been unwilling to stand up for its staff and request additional funding from the Ministry of Defence.

My view, like that of the right hon. Member for Broadland, who spoke very eloquently about the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, is that its employees do tremendous work. I hope that today the commission will reflect on the views of the staff and address the issues of pay and pensions.

1.57 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) on securing the debate. I declare an interest as one of the two parliamentary commissioners for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Holding that post is a great honour. The right hon. Gentleman has described not only the detailed work that this organisation does, but the high esteem in which it is held by the public. It is clear that today the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is a national institution that people recognise, not only for its high standards but for the dedicated work that it does in commemorating the 1.7 million individuals who lost their lives in the two world wars.

That was not always the case. Like many British institutions, this organisation came into being almost by accident, as the right hon. Gentleman said, thanks to the determination and, I think, ferocity of Fabian Ware. This work was not being done at the time. It was clear at the beginning of the first world war that the War Office, as it was in those days, had not thought about what it would do with the casualties that would be left on battlefields across the world. It was only because of Ware’s dedication and the fact that he took it into his own hands to record the sites of the graves that the process began, in that the Government then decided that they needed a grave registration commission to take care of those graves and note where they were. Ware was an incredible individual who was determined to ensure not only that people had a lasting resting place but that the families could visit those graves in future years. Clearly, his contacts with the then Prince of Wales helped to secure the commission’s royal charter in 1917. It did not stop there.

Today, the proposal for a Commonwealth War Graves Commission—in those days, it was the Imperial War Graves Commission—would be straightforward. However, I draw hon. Members’ attention to the debate in the House on 4 May 1920, when an order was laid to agree the funding for the new Imperial War Graves Commission. Remarkably, it was actually opposed by some hon. Members, including the Conservative Member for Holborn, Sir James Remnant, who moved an amendment to reduce the amount by £5 to ensure that the debate took place.

There were two issues. One issue, as the right hon. Member for Broadland mentioned, was the great debate about whether the remains of the dead should be brought home. Sir James Remnant said:

“The dead are certainly not the property of the State or of any particular regiment; the dead belong to their own relations, and anything that savours of interfering with that right is bound to create opposition among the inhabitants certainly of our own Empire.”

At the same time, some local newspapers said that the state was nationalising death.

The other great debate was whether the relatives should be allowed to put their own memorials up in the Commonwealth cemeteries. Sir James Remnant’s argument was that families should be allowed, if they wished, to put their own memorials up, rather than having one imposed by the state. He said that “the relations of the dead should have the right, within properly defined limits, as to size, taste, design, expense, and even of material to be used, to erect what headstones they like as representative of the personality of the individual, and as a personal tribute of affection to their own dead.”—[Official Report, 4 May 1920, Vol. 128, c. 1930.] That would have led to quite some controversy.

In the same debate, Herbert Asquith, who lost his son Raymond in 1916, said:

“These men, be they officers or rank and file, who fell, died with the same courage and the same devotion for the same cause, and they should have their names and their services perpetuated by the same memorial.”—[Official Report, 4 May 1920, Vol. 128, c. 1947.]

That goes to the root cause of a very clever idea that Ware came up with: that no one should get a bigger or different memorial because they were of higher rank or their family were able to pay.

The best example of that in this country must be Hollybrook memorial in Southampton, which is a memorial to those who have no known grave or were lost at sea. It
includes the 823 members of the South African Native Labour Corps, who were lost when the SS Mendi sank just off the Isle of Wight following a collision with a steam packet ship. Alongside those names is the name of Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, who was lost at Scapa Flow in 1916. The memorial, which I visited a few years ago, includes that long list of 823 names alongside that of Lord Kitchener. That sums up the commission’s approach that there is no special treatment for rank.

I have the great honour of being on the commission, and it is something of a tradition in my constituency to be a commissioner. One of my predecessors was Jack Lawson, the Member of Parliament for Chester-le-Street—now in my constituency—from 1919 to 1949. He was on the original Imperial War Graves Commission. Like a lot of people who were involved in the early work of the commission, he was directly affected by the great war as his younger brother, William, was killed in 1916 and was buried at the Chester Farm cemetery in Belgium.

The work of the commission is complex, with a variety of sites in about 23,000 locations across 150 countries. Everyone sees and is rightly proud of the cemeteries in Belgium and northern France, but the standard everywhere in the world is the same, whether it is France, Belgium, Gaza or Egypt. A few years ago, I had the privilege of going to the jungles of Papua New Guinea, where there is a beautiful cemetery, and others are located in Sri Lanka. Ensuring that standards are maintained is incredibly difficult but they are, and that is down to the dedication of those who work for the commission. They ensure not only that standards are maintained, but that the ethos of the commission, which was laid down in its early charter, is maintained for future generations.

When I was a Minister in the Ministry of Defence, I was honoured to be involved in the delivery of the newest commission’s cemetery at Fromelles in France, which opened in 2010. That showed that the work of the commission never really stops because we are still discovering casualties around the world. I pay tribute to the men and women who work for the Ministry of Defence in the casualty recognition department. They go to great lengths to ensure that, where possible, we can identify casualties. That is not always possible, but the commission says that it is important that the names of as many casualties as possible are recorded in perpetuity.

Everyone knows the fantastic cemeteries of northern France, but many people do not realise that half of the commission’s sites are in the UK. The commission is trying to ensure that they get recognition so that people know that they are in local communities and local cemeteries and that, whether they are commission headstones or private memorials, they are maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

I urge hon. Members to visit some of the sites. The commission has a programme to put up green signs so that people know where the sites are located. The next phase, which will happen next year, is to get volunteers to help people with identification and to assist them when they visit. The work goes on. People should visit their local cemeteries and take school groups. The commission does important work not only on the first world war, but on the second world war. School groups are showing a great interest and the commission is rightly putting a great emphasis on education and awareness. I urge everybody to visit the commission’s excellent website if they want to know more about its work.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) has previously raised the issues he mentioned today. I chair the remunerations committee of the commission, and I have said that he can meet the head of personnel and others at the commission to discuss those issues. Decisions on pensions issues are difficult. Similar decisions have had to be taken by trade unions, including the Public and Commercial Services Union. I, along with the other commissioners, recognise the valuable work that all our staff do—not just in this country, but internationally.

The centenary of the commission is in 2017. It will be important not just to look back on the work that has taken place over the past century, but to look forward to ensure that we maintain the graves and memorials. We must ensure that the legacy and memory of the individuals who died in defence of the freedoms that we take for granted in this country are not lost for future generations.

2.9 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) on securing this debate. I hope that my short contribution will go some way to meeting his objective of recognising the Commonwealth War Graves Commission’s valuable contribution to upholding the memory of those who died in the service of their country during the two world wars and other conflicts.

Appropriately commemorating those who died in service, the majority of whom were younger than most parliamentarians, is the least that we can do, and I pay tribute to the commission’s staff, who work so tirelessly in maintaining the cemeteries and memorials. The scale of their work, as everyone knows, is enormous, with memorials situated in more than 23,000 locations in 154 countries, commemorating more than 1.7 million members of the Commonwealth forces who died. It is testament to the expertise and professionalism of the staff that those memorials are kept in such good condition.

More than 1,275 sites are maintained by Commonwealth War Graves Commission staff in Scotland alone, and there are eight such cemeteries in my constituency of West Dunbartonshire to mark those from my community who died during conflict. The local community has a strong and deep link to those cemeteries and memorials, and it regularly pays tribute to the members who lost their lives, and to their families, either through official engagements or through personal moments of reflection.

The sheer numbers of those killed during the conflicts brings home the horrifying fact that every family would have been affected by loss and that every community would have lost generations. Such loss not only has a psychological impact; the physical loss of so many young people led to the decimation of local communities. Ensuring that the memorials are properly maintained not only is a mark of respect to the fallen but provides a lasting historical legacy for generations to come. It is only through providing future generations with a connection to the past and to the impact of war that we can hope that they will never experience the trauma of war.
When discussing the impact of war and how we can learn from the past, it is also fundamentally important to remember the civilians who lost their lives, as well as the service personnel who died on active duty. In this Parliament I was recently given the honour of marking the 75th anniversary of the Clydebank blitz and of commemorating the 528 people who lost their lives over two nights. It was the first time that the Clydebank blitz had been acknowledged in this place, and through such events future generations are given a more rounded education of where we have come from and where we are going.

We must always look to the past with the present. I hope that this debate will go some way to raising awareness of the remit and dedication of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to provide a long-lasting legacy for the fallen. With that in mind, I welcome the commission's work and its attempts to engage with local communities, thus ensuring that schools and community groups across these islands physically visit the memorials. Although that is important, I am impressed by the commission's efforts to engage beyond the physical memorials by using new technology and applications on its website to educate children and to keep up with the new generation.

I pay tribute once more to the staff of the commission for their invaluable work. They are the guardians of the past, for which we should be eternally grateful.

2.13 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) on his graphic and detailed presentation of the case, which we appreciate. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is as relevant now as it was when it was founded, which is testimony to the hard work and determination of those involved.

Neither a soldier nor a politician, the commission’s founder, Sir Fabian Ware, was, at 45, too old to fight, but he became the commander of a mobile unit of that fabulous organisation, the British Red Cross. Saddened by the sheer number of casualties, he felt driven to find a way to ensure that the final resting places of the dead would not be lost forever. His vision chimed with the way to ensure that the final resting places of the dead would not be lost forever. His vision chimed with the vision of Strangford, we have between 60 and 70 graves that are looked after by the commission. I went around the graves with one of the commission’s officers to see its work. A young British Army soldier who died in the 1916 uprising is buried in Greyabbey, and another young soldier from the first world war, Pritchards, was lying in an unattended grave. The commission will look after graves, but it needs the permission of the families. We need to ensure that Ware’s vision can continue to be fulfilled and that war graves are maintained and looked after from Strangford to South Georgia. From the Menin Gate and the Thiepval memorial to the India Gate in Delhi and the Helles memorial in Turkey, the commission tends some of the most iconic architectural structures in the world. From tiny cemeteries containing just a handful of graves to the Tyne Cot cemetery in Belgium, where there are 11,000 burials, the commission ensures that the memory of all those who perished is preserved with the utmost respect.

The commission cares for the cemeteries as a whole, so conservation and reconstruction can, and often does, involve teams from different disciplines. It is not just a matter of tending graves; it is much, much more than that—horticulture, headstone carving and manufacture, and the architectural maintenance teams. They are people with skills, love, affection and commitment to their job. The cemeteries are the sum of their individual parts, and teamwork at all levels helps to maintain their overall appearance.

Even the most durable materials require maintenance, especially when they are used in constructions that are nearly 100 years old. Climate change, pollution and vandalism all take their toll. The background information mentions deliberate vandalism in places such as Libya, Iraq and Beirut, and the commission has made it its business to reinstate those graveyards, as the right hon. Member for Broadland said. Structural renovation projects can involve anything from reroofing buildings to drainage systems. Headstones, memorials and sculptures are kept in good order by a regular cycle of maintenance—a lot of good work is done. To ensure that the quality of materials and the craftsmanship remain a priority, the commission employs specialist masons and runs its own workshops, in which many of the replacement headstones are made.

Barry Edwards, the commission’s architect, was asked to construct a brand-new cemetery at Fromelles to take the remains of 250 Australian and British servicemen who lost their lives at the battle of Fromelles in July 1916. It is amazing to think that, a century on, the commission is still making a difference in the proper remembrance of those who lost their lives in the first world war.

With gardeners and horticultural experts working in 154 countries, the commission has an enviable track record of innovation and expertise. More than half of the 1,750 acres of ground under the commission’s control is given over to fine horticulture, making maintenance a year-round task for its 900 gardeners. That might mean bringing seeds from Nepal to use in Gurkha cemeteries, or bringing maples from Canada for Dieppe. Even in horticulture, the commission goes the extra mile to ensure that each nation’s war dead are remembered properly.

Today, the work continues to the highest standard with the restoration of the Thiepval memorial. I have seen the memorial and remember it well. It is a fitting tribute to the fallen of the Somme. I could not conclude my speech without mentioning the Somme, which means so much to Ulster men and women because of their ancestors’ sacrifice. It is always good to remember that the 36th (Ulster) Division fought alongside the 10th and
creed. The distinction made on account of military or civil rank, race or permanent; headstones should be uniform; there should be no headstone or memorial; headstones and memorials should be that are not from either of the two world wars, responsibility enduring and relevant today.

hon. Members have discussed, that those principles are fourfold:

The final stage of repointing on the Thiepval memorial has been done, and pointing work has started on the natural stone. The new coping stones and stone garlands are being repointed with a specific mortar that is close to the colour of the stone. The memorial is now equipped with a new distribution board for all the new electrical installation, and work continues on the top roof. It has been waterproofed to ensure that it is watertight.

On 15 March, the new flags flew again on top of the memorial. To mark the occasion, Lieutenant Colonel Kian Murphy, representing both France and the UK, rendered the military salute. The next step is placing the British and French crowns on top of the flag poles and cleaning the memorial from top to bottom. It will not be long before we see the final result. We commend the Commonwealth War Graves Commission for all that it has done for its workers and staff, and for commemorating battles of many years ago, particularly the battle of the Somme.

2.20 pm

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) for securing this important debate. If his mission was to mark the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and to educate, he has certainly done his job as far as I am concerned. I have learned a great deal already.

It is almost 100 years since the commission was established, as we have discussed, in 1917 as the Imperial War Graves Commission. The work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is as important now as it ever was. Preserving with such expertise and attention to detail the memory of the 1.7 million people who died during two world wars is a huge task, and we could not wish for a more effective organisation to take on the role.

The founding principles of the commission in 1917 are also as valuable today as they were then. They are fourfold:

“Each of the dead should be commemorated by name on the headstone or memorial; headstones and memorials should be permanent; headstones should be uniform; there should be no distinction made on account of military or civil rank, race or creed.”

It is a testament to the foresight of those who set up the commission in the first place, as many right hon. and hon. Members have discussed, that those principles are enduring and relevant today.

Should the remains of military personnel be found that are not from either of the two world wars, responsibility for arranging a military funeral lies with the Ministry of Defence. However, personnel remains from the first or second world war are the responsibility of the commission. Further to funeral and burial proceedings, the commission maintains graves and memorials in about 23,000 locations in 154 countries around the globe, which demonstrates the enormous scale of the work that the organisation undertakes.

In Scotland alone, the commission cares for around 1,300 individual sites, ranging from local authority-run sites to churchyards of all religious denominations and to military cemeteries owned by the commission. The commission also plays a part in formulating policy relevant to its role: for example, it was represented recently in the Scottish Government’s evidence-gathering sessions for the Burial and Cremation (Scotland) Bill. The commission offered an extremely valuable perspective, based on its experience and expertise, during the passage of the Bill.

Scotland, alongside many other nations throughout Europe and around the globe, suffered a devastating loss of life during the first and second world wars. It is worth reflecting that before the establishment of the commission, there was no organised effort to maintain the graves of war dead, at least in this country, and certainly not those of ordinary servicemen, as has been noted. The work done by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission ensures, quite rightly, that all service personnel killed in the first and second world wars are commemorated appropriately, irrespective of rank, title or social standing.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we owe the Commonwealth War Graves Commission a debt of gratitude not only for honouring the dead but for helping to maintain a poignant reminder of the appalling cost of war?

Steven Paterson: I agree. I am coming on to comments reflecting exactly that point, so I am grateful for that intervention.

As a permanent tribute to the fallen men and women who served their country and community and who paid the ultimate price in doing so, it is important that we maintain our war memorials and graves appropriately. The condition in which they are kept should always reflect the respect and dignity that they deserve. Just two years ago, we began commemorating the centenary of the outbreak of the first world war. The then Scottish First Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), announced Scottish Government funding for war memorial restoration across Scotland. More than £100,000 was granted to 10 separate memorials, including one in my constituency—the war memorial in the city centre—which was given £30,000 for reparation work. Prior to the allocation of those funds, the cenotaph was in need of considerable remedial work, which I am pleased to say was completed thanks to that funding.

Last year, as the newly elected Member of Parliament for Stirling, I took part in a Remembrance Day service and a wreath-laying ceremony at that same cenotaph. War memorials such as the one in my constituency, as well as individual graves, are hugely instrumental in educating future generations about the sacrifices that previous generations made to secure the freedoms that we take for granted. It is important that we commend the excellent work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.
Commission and highlight the need to ensure the appropriate upkeep of cenotaphs across the country, not to celebrate conflicts but to remember the casualties and the sacrifices made. A check of the Commonwealth War Grave Commission’s website informs me that in my constituency, there are more than 240 war graves, each commemorating an individual from the Stirling area who fell in one of the two world wars. One of the larger cemeteries in my constituency, Ballengeich, is the final resting place of 58 such individuals.

Although I have made much mention of my constituency, it is important to recognise the valuable work carried out in this area across the whole UK and globally. Six member Governments form the Commonwealth War Graves Commission: Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa and the United Kingdom. We should commend the fact that the UK has consistently committed the largest proportion of funding to allow the commission to undertake its valuable work. All other member Governments also make a financial contribution directly to the commission, and non-member Commonwealth nations often contribute to the cause by maintaining war graves in their own nations, as many Members have noted. Such international co-operation demonstrates the rightly determined support for the cause of commemorating our war dead. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate.

2.26 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I commend the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) for securing this important debate and for his interesting opening speech. It is timely, given that so many of us are focusing on the events of a century ago and on the immense sacrifices made by so many around the world in the two great wars of the last century, among other conflicts that have secured the freedoms that we take so much for granted today. It has been interesting to hear about the personal links that remain. Like the right hon. Gentleman, I have a grandfather, Ed Oswald, who made a contribution in the Royal Navy during the second world war. Such circumstances make this matter very personal for many of us.

We in the Scottish National party believe firmly that the Government should continue their support for the commission so it can continue to meet its important obligations and objectives. We fully support and commend the commission’s work. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) said, it is only right that people who died while serving in our armed forces are commemorated properly, and that there is a lasting historical legacy as well as a memorial for the generations coming after. The work of the commission is also important in highlighting to those who choose to serve today that we recognise and understand the dangers inherent in the job that they sign up to do.

Scotland, the UK and nations around the world suffered devastating losses of life in the world wars. I spent many hours as an undergraduate studying those particular wars, but no matter how passionately and academically one tried to look at what happened, it was and remains impossible to be anything other than devastated by those young lives lost and wasted by the thousand upon thousand. The only thing that we can do now is remember those who were lost and learn the lessons from the conflicts in which they perished. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission plays a vital role in allowing us to do so.

I was interested to read on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website—I echo hon. Members’ comments about its excellence—significant reference to the Scottish national war memorial. Although the memorial is not owned by the commission, it is clear that there are strong links and a unity of purpose between those organisations that the names of each person killed in each specific locality during the first world war should be remembered forever.

I was fortunate to visit the Scottish national war memorial recently and see the care taken to remember each individual person and commemorate their life. People are named individually, and it is a peaceful, beautiful and fitting memorial. On the way out, there is a statue titled “Reveille” commemorating the end of war and symbolically looking forward to a new peaceful dawn. I was struck by that beautiful representation of the importance of looking forward peacefully as a means of remembering the fallen. I have a picture of it in my office. It sends a powerful message of remembrance.

I join the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) in commending the dedication of the founder of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Fabian Ware. A century has passed since the commission’s inception. Clearly, the 1,300 staff of the commission have cared tirelessly for the cemeteries and memorials of those who died in the two world wars. It bears repeating that the commission is working in a staggering 23,000 locations, in no fewer than 154 countries, to commemorate all those men and women of the Commonwealth forces who died. The scale of that work really is immense and the work involved in managing it must be recognised.

As the right hon. Member for Broadland noted, under its royal charter obligations, the commission is responsible not only for the care and commemoration of the graves and memorials of the members of the Commonwealth armed forces who died, but for the protection of their remains in perpetuity, where their final resting place is known. The commission commemorates those with no known grave on stand-alone memorials, such as screen walls erected in burial grounds and elsewhere. Casualties interred in common graves may not always have a headstone marking the grave, but in that case they will be commemorated appropriately, away from the burial location.

The commission continues to develop and progress its work in remembering those who have fallen, with appeals still going out today using the latest social media and web technology, as opposed to the very immediate personal appeals made at the time. I know that, because the commission office, which is not far from my own constituency, at Gartmore parish church, is still looking for the relatives of soldiers who perished a century ago, including Private James Cameron of the King’s Own Scottish Borderers, who died in June 1917, and Private James Graham of the Gordon Highlanders, who died in June 1918. That kind of dedication to remembering those who lost their lives is clear; it is what the commission is all about.

It is heartening that the commission is embracing technology. It is using apps and its excellent website very effectively to engage with schools and community
groups to encourage them to visit the memorials, so as to bring this particular aspect of history much closer to people individually.

We have heard that legislation allows the commission to ensure that war graves and memorials are protected as far as possible. The commission clearly spends significant time inspecting and maintaining war graves via its own maintenance teams. It is a huge undertaking. There are over 100,000 war memorials in the UK. The commission currently cares for approximately 21,000 graves and memorials in more than 1,200 sites across Scotland, whether they are local cemeteries, churchyards, dedicated military cemeteries, or single graves in burial grounds.

I would be surprised if anyone here has not seen graves cared for by the commission. I remember as a child visiting Shanwell cemetery in Carnoustie and looking at the beautifully kept Commonwealth war graves. In my travels around my constituency, I see that there are Commonwealth war graves in cemeteries in Barrhead, Eaglesham and Newton Mearns, marking the sacrifice of young men and young women—and there are graves of young women, among those of the young men, who were also cut down in their prime.

Last year, it was an honour to attend many memorial services around East Renfrewshire. As well as attending the opening of an outstanding community-funded war memorial at Neilston, I was privileged to march with the Jewish veterans in Newton Mearns and to meet a veteran in Barrhead, of whom I have spoken in this House before, and who cycled to Clydebank from Barrhead during the blitz to put out the fires there. That is the kind of sacrifice that people were prepared to make and that we should commemorate.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) noted, the commission’s current Living Memory initiative, to encourage people to visit the sites in their local areas and learn more about the stories of those who are buried there, will undoubtedly lead to greater knowledge and understanding of those who died and the circumstances of their deaths. These graves and memorials can help people to connect with those who were involved in past conflicts, as well as giving us a local connection, a real human connection with history, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling said, a desire to learn very important lessons from the past.

The commission also tends a number of architectural structures, from the imposing India Gate in Delhi to tiny cemeteries containing just a handful of graves. It does that work around the globe, ensuring that the sacrifices of the very brave servicemen and women from countries all around the world are noted and remembered. I was very pleased to see a feature on the commission website highlighting service personnel from Canada, South Africa and India, among other countries. I am very pleased to hear of the ongoing work of the commission in relation to Indian families who may have connections to our service personnel in the past.

From the trenches of the western front to the deserts of Mesopotamia, over 1.1 million Indian soldiers served in the first world war. By November 1918, over 60,000 men from the subcontinent—who were diverse in culture, language and faith—had given their lives. In death, these men were treated according to their respective religions. As the right hon. Member for Broadland indicated, while Muslim soldiers were buried and their graves marked by headstones, the remains of Sikh and Hindu soldiers were cremated, with their ashes being scattered and their names engraved on cremation memorials around the globe.

In Eritrea, nearly 1,000 Commonwealth war dead from the second world war are buried or commemorated. The hon. Member for North Durham spoke of the astonishing range of locations all over the world. As we have heard, the member Governments that make up the commission reflect that kind of geographical diversity and the truly global nature of the conflicts that the commission commemorates. Those Governments contribute proportionately to the commission.

Clearly, there are ongoing discussions about whether to transfer the responsibility for the maintenance of war graves of military personnel who have been buried in the UK since 1948 from the commission to the Ministry of Defence. The key point is that these graves must be maintained and looked after properly, and that there is a clear responsibility for doing so. It is important that the Government continue their support of the commission and that discussions are facilitated in order that these obligations and objectives can be met.

Like the right hon. Member for Broadland, we on the Scottish National party Benches pay tribute to the very hard work undertaken by the commission’s staff in the UK and across the globe, who maintain the commission’s reputation for providing such a high standard of maintenance. He also made valuable points about the contribution of so many countries, where so many of these graves lie, and I agree with that.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady has had her 10 minutes.

2.36 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Streeter.

It is vital that we remember, and that is what today’s debate is all about; indeed, it is what the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is all about. I thank the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) for securing this debate. This has been a very informative debate, with contributions from across the House about the importance of the commission’s work. That work is not only about maintaining the graves that we have heard so much about today, but about the way that the commission is taking history into the 21st century, by using web technology to help us look through our past and consider our own history, and of course so that we can take that knowledge and pass it on to the next generation. It is vital that we remember, and in particular that we remember the lives that were given for our freedom.

Of course, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission does phenomenal work. This year, we are remembering the losses in Jutland and, as we have already heard, the losses in the battle of the Somme in July 1916. The commission’s work continues day in and day out, and we must acknowledge it.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate and, of course, very grateful for the work of the commissioners, including that of my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). The contributions this afternoon have really reflected the importance of the commission’s work.
Maintaining and upgrading 23,000 cemeteries and memorials across 154 countries is no mean feat. That work includes replacing around 20,000 graves a year. Of course, there is also the important work of building on 100 years of record-keeping. It is important that we recognise the outstanding work that the commission does, and of course quality is at the forefront of all that work.

That work can only be achieved because of the total dedication of the 1,300 people who work across the world for the commission. Many of them work here in the UK but others are employed to provide vital skills and services right across the globe. Of course, the commission’s work is dedicated to the memory of the 1,700,000 men and—as we have heard today—women from across the Commonwealth who were killed. The commission’s staff work so hard to maintain the highest standards, but above that to maintain the memory and dignity of each young life that was lost—and it was predominantly young lives that were lost. The staff keep alive the memory of those who were lost, gathering more information and historical knowledge over time, to share that collective memory and collective story that speak of a Europe that was once divided against itself. They ensure that that is never forgotten.

Although we often recall less peaceful times at formal ceremonies at the memorials and cemeteries, it is the individual care that the staff show to the families and friends of the lost that causes them to stand out. They enable people to move on but also to cherish their memories. When people walk into one of the commission’s many cemeteries—as I have on a number of occasions—scan the thousands of pristine graves and start to read the names, ages and ranks of those who fell, they are taken on a journey of sacrifice: the sacrifice of parents and families, of their children and of the many young who gave their lives. It is a reminder to us, and to all who hold power—not least in this place—that our responsibility to their legacy is to find political solutions, no matter how difficult that is, to the challenges we face in our globe today.

The commission does not just keep history alive, it presents the past in such a way that we will never forget. As the commission reaches 100 years next year, we must mark its excellent work, as the right hon. Member for Broadland reminded us. But the commission is not just an organisation; it is the sum of its many parts. By that I mean the dedicated staff, many of whom have spent all their working lives there—indeed, for some of those I met, generations of their families had worked in the organisation—and make the commission what it is. Nevertheless, they look to us to provide them with the support they need when their terms and conditions and pay need to be addressed, and it would be remiss of me not to raise that today.

I have met the trade unions—the Public and Commercial Services Union, Unite and Prospect—and I must declare an interest as secretary of the Unite group here in Parliament and as a former national official of that union. I have also met the commission’s staff and have listened closely to the issues they have raised, and I know that they want their voice to be heard in this place this afternoon.

We believe that deals can be brokered, to give the workforce greater morale. We know that there have been difficult discussions about pensions and that pension schemes have been challenged, but the staff have outstanding questions about what happened and it is only right that we look to find solutions to the challenges that they have identified.

Mr Kevan Jones: May I make the offer to my hon. Friend that I have already made to the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), that if she wants to meet the commission’s management to talk about personnel, I can certainly facilitate that?

Rachael Maskell: I thank my hon. Friend for that offer and I will certainly follow it up with him.

Commission staff have outstanding questions about their pensions, but that takes us on to the issues that are pertinent—particularly this week—regarding their pay. Over time, the staff have accepted lower rates of pay and less favourable terms and conditions—that came out in the Towers Watson global grading and pay review—and we have heard about the inconveniences to family life, whether that is taking children out of their schools or spouses not being able to have a career because of moves. The value of the jobs was also recognised in the review—for instance, the learning of a foreign language, not superficially but in a way that means being able to negotiate deals, employ staff and manage contracts. The staff’s dedication, and the quality and standard of their work, means that they should be remunerated at an appropriate rate. That is what the review says. Public sector workers are seeing a 1% increase in their pay but the commission is offering half that to its staff. We should seriously look at what the deals mean for the staff and ensure, as we enter this time when staff are working over and above what is expected of them so that the public can remember and commemorate 100 years since the battles of the first world war, that the staff’s battles today are well recognised and that staff are remunerated appropriately.

Labour wants a clear win-win solution and we believe that one can be found. I therefore urge the commissioners present and the Minister to find such a solution. We must remember that the staff are public servants and want to give the best they can, and the respect we show them will, therefore, be reflected in the excellence of their work.

As we move towards its 100th year next year, it is vital to ensure that the commission’s work and its vision for the future—building on Fabian Ware’s initial vision—is strong, including the commitment not only of its staff but of the public, in the way that it celebrates what has been achieved, and also to ensure that it continues to remember the ultimate price paid by the 1,700,000 people whose graves it cares for day in, day out, around the globe.

2.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) on securing this important debate to highlight the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and on his excellent and informative speech.
It is opportune to have such a debate when this year we are commemorating several important battles of the first world war, including those of the Somme and Jutland. I am grateful for all the contributions this afternoon, but I particularly acknowledge the speech of the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and his service as a war graves commissioner.

I agree with all who have spoken that the CWGC does excellent work in ensuring that the 1.7 million people who died in the two world wars will never be forgotten. For 99 years it has worked around the world to commemorate those who gave their lives, by ensuring that their bodies are at rest in cemeteries and that those with no known grave are remembered on memorials. The CWGC cares for cemeteries and memorials at 23,000 locations in 154 countries across the globe. The CWGC’s important work in ensuring that individuals who gave their lives are always remembered throughout the Commonwealth, and in Europe and across the world, is to be commended.

The CWGC is one of the Government’s key partners in our first world war centenary commemorations. This year we are working with it on our two national events, to mark the centenaries of Jutland and the Somme. The battle of Jutland was the largest naval battle of the war. The CWGC commemorates more than 6,000 Royal Navy sailors who lost their lives in that battle, be that in war graves across the UK and Scandinavia or at memorials with the names of thousands of sailors whose bodies were never recovered.

My grandfather, Clyde Turner, served on HMS Malaya during the battle, so I have a strong association with the commemoration. He occasionally spoke about his experiences as a stoker and subsequently as a chief petty officer. He was a career naval man, and a real influence on me in my early years. He died in 1966, and I still hold his memory dear. I am pleased, therefore, to be the Minister for the first world war centenary at this time and I look forward to attending the commemorative events in Orkney on 31 May and meeting other descendants of those who served at Jutland.

To mark the centenary of the battle of Jutland, a number of events are taking place at CWGC sites. These include the event at Queensferry cemetery in West Lothian on 28 May, and national events on 31 May at St Magnus cathedral and Lyness Royal Naval cemetery. There are also Royal Navy events at the Chatham, Portsmouth and Plymouth naval memorials, and other events at Esbjerg new cemetery in Denmark, Fredrikstad military cemetery in Norway and Kviiberg cemetery in Sweden.

On 1 July, we will commemorate the bloodiest battle of the first world war: the battle of the Somme. Fought between July and November 1916, the battle affected millions of people across the Commonwealth. Some 150,000 Commonwealth servicemen lie buried in 250 military and 150 civilian cemeteries on the Somme, and there are six memorials to the missing that commemorate by name more than 100,000 whose graves are not known. I recently went to France and visited the Somme battlefields and the many cemeteries—all beautifully maintained and cared for by the CWGC. I put on record my appreciation for the work done, and I thank those who gave me a tremendous guided tour of the battlefields. I found the trip very moving.

We are encouraging communities across the UK to hold acts of remembrance on 30 June and 1 July in a way that feels appropriate. On 5 April, together with the Royal British Legion, we launched online guides providing information about holding commemorative events. An online map was also made available for event organisers.
Mr Evennett] to publish details of their commemorations. I am pleased that nearly 30 events have already been listed, ranging from a vigil at Holbeck cemetery near Leeds to school groups visiting High Wycombe cemetery in Buckinghamshire to learn about those who fought at the Somme and are buried in the cemetery. Many of these events will take place at CWGC sites. I urge and advise communities planning to commemorate this important centenary to add their details to the map on the Government website.

We remember that the battle lasted 141 days, up to 18 November. There will be a daily service of remembrance at the Thiepval memorial hosted by the Royal British Legion and the CWGC throughout the 141 days. A range of events will also take place at CWGC cemeteries across the region throughout the period. Regimental associations, communities and descendants can therefore participate on a day particularly significant to them, and they should check the CWGC website, which contains the relevant information.

I also mention the recently launched CWGC Living Memory campaign. More than 300,000 Commonwealth servicemen and women who died in the two world wars are commemorated in the UK. In fact, one is never more than 3 miles from a war grave anywhere in the country. Many graves lie in local cemeteries, and CWGC has launched the campaign, which calls on communities to rediscover their local site and remember the lives of those within the graves. The project encourages people, whether young or old, to discover and learn about war graves and their heritage. It is particularly important that the young learn through education about the sacrifices and events of the first world war.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Broadland mentioned those who are buried in British churchyards. In my constituency, Private William White was buried in the churchyard of St Paulinus in Crayford. He was wounded at Ypres. He came back. He was a Crayford man. Sadly, he died at home from his injuries. That is an example of how we should commemorate in local communities individuals who served. It is a wonderful project that the CWGC wants people to get involved with. I encourage everyone to locate war graves near them and to learn about those who lost their lives.

I again thank all those who contributed today, in particular because it is an important commemoration and an important time to give thanks for the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. In particular, I thank my right hon. Friend for securing the debate and for all his work, which benefits from his knowledge and experience as a historian. As a Commonwealth war graves commissioner and a member of the DCMS first world war advisory group, his knowledge and advice have been and remain invaluable. I conclude by paying tribute to all those who lost their lives in or were affected by the two world wars. I also pay tribute to the dedicated staff who do such a fantastic job at the CWGC. As we heard, many of them are gardeners, stonemasons, administrators and the rest. Together, they ensure that those who died will never be forgotten.

2.57 pm

Mr Keith Simpson: I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for the way he wound up this debate. Like him, I thank all colleagues who participated. I merely remind colleagues that I brought this debate forward to put front and centre the role and work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in providing so much of the backdrop and front of stage for many of the commemorations of the first world war.

I also secured the debate to emphasise that it is the Commonwealth War Graves Commission—the Commonwealth countries that are members have a view and make a contribution; it is not an outpost of the Ministry of Defence. We have a budget, and like all budgets it is under enormous stress and strain. There is an understandable reluctance among all the contributing countries to make a bigger contribution. Two colleagues expressed concerns about staff pay and conditions, and I hope the invitation from the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) will be taken up. He has done so much hard work in this area.

I am very grateful to all who participated in this debate. I am sure that the staff of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission will thank them for their tribute, not least because colleagues from all the nations of the United Kingdom have contributed. In their different ways, they want to commemorate their communities and their communities’ roles in both world wars. I think it has been a fitting tribute.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.
Housing in Newcastle

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE in the Chair]

2.59 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered housing in Newcastle.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased to have secured this short debate on a subject that is so critical to my constituents.

I am sure that everyone present is an avid reader of my website, chionwurahmp.com, and so will know that I publish pie charts that summarise the issues that constituents come to me with. At the moment, March’s pie charts are up, showing that I dealt with 36 housing issues that month—just behind the 37 benefits issues.

Since I was first elected six years ago, housing has consistently been in the top three issues in Newcastle upon Tyne Central, and often No. 1, which is why I have secured several debates on housing and related issues, including on empty properties in 2012 and on local authority funding settlements and holdbacks in 2013.

Earlier this year, I held a ward summit in Blakelaw in my constituency that was attended by local councillors, residents groups and other organisations. The minutes are on my website, and show that, again, housing was the No. 1 issue. Late last year, I held another ward summit, in Benwell and Scotswood, where housing was also the No. 1 issue. Just last week, I held an informal surgery with the Sisters Study Circle group at the Tawheed mosque in Elswick, and housing was of great concern to them.

Why was I asked, is it now next to impossible to get a council house in Newcastle? I tried to explain that there are 6,000 households on the waiting list, of which 4,000 are actively bidding for properties, but only 185 properties become available each month. I also explained that much of the council housing stock has been sold off and that, really, it was now available only to those with the greatest need. “Why did the Government not build more houses?”, they asked me. “Did they not realise the impact bad housing has on health, crime and education? How can young people focus on studying or realise the impact bad housing has on health, crime and education? How can young people focus on studying or

After some time, I grew tired of explaining the Government’s logic while at the same time thinking, “I myself don’t understand.” My job is not to justify the Government but to hold them to account. I am sure the Minister agrees that my constituents are right to be concerned about the lack of housing in Newcastle. I applied for this debate to find out from him exactly how the Government plan to build more homes to improve the lives of the thousands of people in my constituency who need a decent home.

Last year, the Government presided over the building of just 9,590 homes for social rent, compared with the 33,180 delivered in Labour’s last year in office. Last year’s was the lowest level of affordable homes built for more than two decades. Having knocked on a great many doors over the last few weeks—indeed, over the last few years—I know that they bear testament to the last Labour Government’s investment in our housing stock. Labour could, and should, have built even more homes, but the decent homes programme—visible in new doors, windows, kitchens, bathrooms and the very fabric of so many homes in Newcastle—effectively renewed the existing stock so that it could last for another generation.

That programme contrasts with this Government’s record of cutting investment and of building just one new social home for every eight sold off through right to buy—a Government whose use of the term “affordable rent” is not recognisable to most people; who thought up the unfair bedroom tax, which has affected half a million households; and who have overseen a 22% rise in private rents in Newcastle since 2011, when incomes have barely risen at all.

Newcastle is a growing city. It is estimated that by 2021 there will be 16,200 more people living in our great city, and the Government have a duty to ensure that local authorities have the means—both the funding and the powers—to provide the homes that local people need. Newcastle needs 16,400 new homes between now and March 2030: around 1,000 new homes per year, not including student accommodation for those studying at our world-class universities. Residents quite rightly do not want to lose any of our fantastic greenfield assets in and around Newcastle, so much of the land available for building these homes for Newcastle is brownfield, with high clean-up costs.

Providing the homes required in such circumstances is already a huge challenge for the council, given the ideologically and politically driven extent of the cuts to central Government funding, yet the Government seem insistent on piling on further pressure and putting further barriers in the way. The 1% cut in social housing rent over the next four years will leave a hole of £593 million in the council’s 30-year financial model—that is £0.6 billion. That investment was earmarked for building the homes that the city needs and for investing in the city’s stock. Although a 1% cut in social rent may seem a good thing for social tenants, it is the council that pays for it, not the Government. It will take money away from the capital investment needed for repairs, improvements and, critically, new homes.

If the Government were so concerned about saving social tenants’ money, they would abolish the grotesque bedroom tax. By the way, the Government are actually the greatest beneficiary of this rent cut, because the housing payment bill for the Department for Work and Pensions will fall considerably. It is the Government who will benefit from this cut, not social tenants.

It is not hard to see that when housing authorities’ incomes are cut, they will have less to invest—more than half a billion less, in the case of Newcastle City Council. Trampling over locally elected and accountable councils’ planned infrastructure investment in such a way deserves its own debate. But there is more: that hole in the city’s investment plan will be widened even further by the Government’s forced sale of higher-value housing to pay for the new right to buy. Building a new home in Newcastle costs a minimum of £120,000, but the result of the much criticised Housing and Planning Bill will be the selling off of homes at an average price of £80,000—so,
£80,000 in income versus £120,000 to build them. Even if all the income were reinvested, at best we would replace only two thirds of all homes sold.

I hope the Minister is aware of the analysis published by Shelter last month, which showed that Newcastle will need to sell more than 400 homes every year to raise the £52 million annual contribution to the Government’s policy. That £52 million contribution must be paid for by selling off homes. That is 100 more homes than are built each year now, before the Government’s housing Bill bites, with its inevitable knock-on effect on investment.

My constituents who are on the lowest incomes already find it much more difficult to buy homes, even at the lower end of the market, than they would in other parts of the country. The council has done some brilliant work in recent years: delivering much needed specialist house building; building more affordable homes; returning vacant private sector properties to the market, which is very important; and working to reduce homelessness. But it is under attack from a Government who seem determined to dismantle our social housing stock from Whitehall. I simply cannot see how the council is supposed to meet the needs of local people, given the straitjacket that the Minister is putting them into. Those I have spoken to in Newcastle believe, as I do, that Government locally and nationally have a duty to provide homes for people. I want to see a healthy mix of tenures. [Interruption.] Perhaps the Minister is looking on his mobile phone to see how that can be achieved.

The actions of the Government and the housing Bill will throw up more barriers to building homes that, frankly, seem designed to destroy social housing altogether. Will the Minister tell us what role he sees for councils in building and providing homes, and how much discretion they should have in fulfilling that role? What modelling have his Government done on the effect of the 1% cut in social rents on investment in Newcastle and across the country, and will he publish that modelling? Does he not agree that decisions on rent should be with the local authority, and that if central Government want to cut rent—a laudable aim—they should provide the money to pay for it, rather than punish future generations? What modelling has he done on the forced sale of council homes to fund his right to buy policy? Does he agree with the analysis that Shelter has done on this and, if not, will he publish his own sums?

On the subject of the right to buy policy for housing associations, I wrote to the Minister last year about constituents of mine who are unable to sell their properties because the freehold is owned by the St Mary Magdalene & Holy Jesus Trust, which refuses to extend the leases. In his response, he said that my constituents should write to the advisory body LEASE, which they did, to no avail. There are three different housing Acts that affect three different types of properties and the rights they enjoy. The Minister said he would consider this further as part of the Housing and Planning Bill. Has he any hope, or indeed any clarity, to offer my constituents on that issue?

What would the Minister say to my constituents who cannot get a council home and cannot afford the rising rents in Newcastle? Does he think that his housing Bill will enable Newcastle City Council to build enough homes in the next 30 years and can he explain how? If it will not, how does he expect the private sector to fill the gap at affordable prices for different types of tenure? Finally, will he take a leaf out of the book of the new Labour Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, and commit to ensuring affordable housing in Newcastle?

3.15 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) on securing the debate.

I do not recognise the Shelter figures. I have said openly that they are out-of-date figures based on a false premise, so the Government have secured data from local authorities to make sure we are working on up-to-date figures. Some 16 million pieces of data form that information. The hon. Lady might want to look back at the Housing and Planning Bill and what is actually in it. There have been discussions over the past couple of weeks, including in the House yesterday and in the Lords, and she will see that quite a lot of things will be coming through in statutory instruments during the summer. However, we have garnered 16 million pieces of data to make sure we have the correct information.

Chi Onwurah: Are the 16 million pieces of data that will form the basis of housing policy publicly available?

Brandon Lewis: While we are doing policy formation, they are not, but they will be in the public domain in future.

The hon. Lady mentioned the issues that Newcastle has in building houses; I think Newcastle should build houses. I visited recently and saw some of the excellent work being done up there with housing associations and private developers in Newcastle, but local authorities have a part to play in building different tenures of housing that are appropriate for their local areas. I would encourage them to make use of the £3.4 billion worth of funding that is available within local authorities for that specific purpose, before we even touch on the almost £23 billion worth of reserves that local authorities have got, which they could choose to use. Indeed, Newcastle has got £161 million before we even get on to the housing revenue account borrowing, which is £3.4 billion that they can use.

Chi Onwurah: I want to press the Minister on the figures that he is using. Is he saying that the £161 million of reserves is available to be spent as Newcastle wishes?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Lady will have to ask Newcastle City Council. It is its money and its reserves. She might want to have a chat with the leader in Newcastle about how he chooses to use his reserves. Also, before we even reach the housing revenue account, local government has £3.4 billion that it can use. Indeed, we created more than 18 months or two years ago for local authorities, but there is more than that as well. We want to ensure there is good quality affordable housing for everybody. We are determined to increase home ownership: 86% of our population want to own their own home. We are also making sure that we deliver an increase in the housing supply.
The hon. Lady will hopefully take note of the fact that there was a 25% increase in housing supply last year alone, coming from the lowest level of house building that this country has seen since the 1920s, a situation we inherited from the now shadow Housing Minister, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), who oversaw just 88,000 homes being built. We are now up to 181,000 new properties created last year. In Labour’s time in government, for every 170 homes sold under right to buy, only one got built. Under the reinvigorated scheme that this Government have introduced, it is one for one, and under the extended scheme that we are now rolling out to the housing associations, it will also be one for one. Thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), in London it will be two for one.

In Newcastle, a third of all homes built since 2010 have been affordable, reflecting more than £22 million worth of Government investment. I am pleased to see the progress—I have seen some of it for myself—in public and private partnerships, which have built some 1,800 homes. That is just one part of the progress we have made since 2010. By 2010—this is an important fact—the stock of affordable homes had fallen by 420,000. We had quite a big housing deficit to deal with, which we inherited from Labour, with 1.8 million families on the social housing waiting list. Five years later we were the first Government since the 1980s to finish their term with more affordable homes than when they started. We delivered 193,000 affordable homes in England between 2011 and 2015, exceeding our target by 23,000, and on our watch councils built more homes in five years than in the previous 13.

We are now investing a further £8 billion to deliver 400,000 affordable housing starts, including 100,000 homes for affordable rent. That is the largest affordable house building programme by any Government since the 1970s. As I have said, we respect the fact that 86% of the population want to own their own home; that is why our affordable housing programme will also support home ownership, and will include a commitment to build 200,000 starter homes. Younger first-time buyers will be able to buy their first home with a 20% discount. That means that in Newcastle upon Tyne the average starter home would cost no more than £120,000. When that is linked to a 5% deposit, we are starting to see affordability—of a kind that has not been present for the best part of a decade—coming back. We are still seeking expressions of interest from local authorities who want to use the £1.2 billion of funding that the Prime Minister announced in January to deliver starter homes.

Others in the hon. Lady’s constituency might be interested in shared ownership, with a deposit as low as £1,500—part of £4.1 billion of funding that we have opened up as a route into home ownership, delivering homes for 135,000 people. Our prospectus inviting bids for that funding outside London was published just a few weeks ago, and I encourage all local authorities to look at the bidding for that. Some 600 households in Newcastle have benefited from Help to Buy, and we have extended the scheme so more can follow. We are clear that social tenants should also have the opportunity to achieve their ambition and realise their aspiration of home ownership. To that end, we have said that we will extend the right to buy to those 1.3 million tenants, so that they have the same opportunities. Housing associations have also committed themselves to providing an additional home for every property sold. That is in addition to the reinvigorated right to buy scheme. The maximum discount was increased in 2012 and, as I have said, for the first time ever a requirement was introduced to build a new affordable home for every additional sale, nationally.

I am pleased to say that 574 homes have been sold through right to buy in Newcastle since 2010, but I want to be clear that we are not just supporting potential home owners. We are reducing the cost of social renting, as the hon. Lady outlined. The cost of social rent has roughly doubled in the past five years; it has been moving up faster than private rents. The 1% reduction will benefit tenants and if it benefits the wider public by reducing the deficit that we were left by Labour, that is a good thing as well. Almost £400 million will deliver 8,000 new specialist affordable homes for the most vulnerable in society as well.

In the private rented sector, which the hon. Lady touched on, we will continue to boost supply, which is the best way of driving up quality, choice and affordability for tenants. That includes our £1 billion Build to Rent fund, and the £3.5 billion guarantee scheme to finance those thousands of extra homes built specifically for private rent. Tenants in the private rented sector will also be better protected thanks to changes we are implementing through the Housing and Planning Bill to target rogue landlords, including banning orders for the most prolific and serious offenders, civil penalties of up to £30,000 for certain breaches, and a fit and proper person test for landlords letting out licensed properties. That is the biggest package ever seen in the sector.

The Government were elected to give everyone the best chance of living a fulfilling and good life. That will be achieved only by improving the housing market in every part of the country. Newcastle is no exception, as I am sure the hon. Lady will agree. That is why the Housing and Planning Bill is so important. It will drive up housing supply, and I hope that later today the House of Lords will recognise that the Government have an electoral mandate to deliver starter homes and the extension of the right to buy; I hope that they will stop blocking the will of the elected House, and that the Labour party will stop blocking the will of the public, expressed through the electoral mandate, and the protocols and will of the House of Commons, which show some of the biggest majorities of this Parliament. That is our mandate and we are determined to repay the trust of the British people who elected us on that manifesto, by building more homes that people can afford, making it easier for communities to build the homes they need and, above all, supporting the aspirations of people who work hard and want to buy a home of their own.

Question put and agreed to.
Tenant Farming

3.30 pm

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered tenant farming.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful for the opportunity to lead this debate.

As hon. Members know, tenant farming is an agricultural system in which a landowner contributes land and perhaps some capital and management, and the tenant contributes labour and the remaining capital and management. It is an important part of the agricultural industry. In my county of East Sussex, it is estimated that there are more than 35,000 hectares of tenanted land. One in three farms throughout the country are tenanted, and between 20,000 and 25,000 farmers are wholly or mostly reliant on tenanted land.

Two organisations fight the corner of tenant farmers—the Tenant Farmers Association, whose national chairman, Stephen Wyrill, is in the Public Gallery, and the National Farmers Union. I thank both for their assistance in preparing for this debate. The Government are also proud to fight the corner of tenant farmers. They have a proud record of putting in place policies to help the farming community. I want to note two in particular: first, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor’s announcement that farmers will be able to average their income over two to five years for tax purposes, which is very welcome and helps rural businesses to survive in difficult seasons; and, secondly, the recent decision by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to agree to move forward on recommendations to draw up a mental health strategy for the farming industry in Britain. Farmers can face immense strain, as they have to contend with the difficulties of business and climate, and they often work very long hours in isolation. It is right that proactive measures are put in place to ensure their mental wellbeing as they cope with those pressures. I congratulate the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) on his leadership on that issue.

There is always more to do, and that is the case with tenant farming in particular. Over the past couple of years, one theme that has emerged consistently in my discussions with tenant farmers across Wealden and the organisations that represent them is the length and security of tenancies. The Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995 introduced farm business tenancies to the industry. The measure marked perhaps the most comprehensive deregulation of the agricultural let sector in its long history. Farm business tenancies are extremely widespread, although there is scepticism in the industry about whether they have helped or hindered. High rents, limited security, stretching repairing obligations, which are key to keeping businesses thriving, and other liabilities are commonplace and do little to limit the stress and instability that naturally come with farming.

The majority of tenancies run for fewer than five years, and independent surveys report that the average is less than four years. That does not give tenant farmers the security they wish for.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that agricultural landlords should develop lasting relationships with tenant farmers through long-term flexible tenancy agreements in areas such as North Cornwall and Wealden?

Nusrat Ghani: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will come on to that point later. Flexible tenancies and good relationships between landlords and tenants are absolutely key.

The big problem for tenant farmers is that the negotiation of tenancies is key, but they have little leverage over it. Farming is a long-term process that needs capital investment, patience, good soil management and the ability to balance the profitable years against the bad. Most recently, that problem has affected farmers in the dairy industry.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): One of the big issues obstructing young entrants into the market is the longer tenancy agreements. Does my hon. Friend agree that shorter agreements allow new entrants—particularly those under 40—into market?

Nusrat Ghani: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. Tenancies need to be flexible but, if a tenant farmer wants to explore their industry and their business, they need the opportunity to extend their tenancy. Farmers can struggle if their tenancies are short; those things are not facilitated by short-term tenancies. I referred to the Government’s welcome move to extend tax averaging from two to five years, but it is odd that that example of good Government policy is undermined by and inconsistent with tenancy terms, which are, on average, shorter than the period allowed for averaging farm profits. Similarly, many tenants cannot even begin to think of the Government’s 10-year countryside stewardship scheme. What is the point when they cannot guarantee being there for the length of the scheme?

At the moment, landlords can offer short terms for high rents at little risk to themselves, but they leave the tenant in endless uncertainty and hold back investment and long-term sustainable land use. Such tenancies can be particularly difficult for livestock tenant farmers, who see limited returns. I spent a morning with my constituent Elizabeth Buchanan of Black Ven Farm in Nutley, testing for tuberculosis—I assure hon. Members there is no TB on her farm—and she said to me:

“It encourages short-termism of the worst sort.”

I tried to get other quotations from tenant farmers in my constituency, but they were concerned that raising them in the Chamber might reflect badly on their landlords. That is an issue as well.

Some have argued that legislation to impose long-term security on tenancies is the answer. As a free-market Conservative, I do not wish to see that kind of imposition, but we should not be afraid of providing incentives for longer-term tenancies. Landowners get 100% agricultural property relief from inheritance tax if the person who owned the land farmed it themselves, or if it was used by someone else on a short-term grazing licence, or if it was let on a tenancy that began on or after 1 September 1995—after the introduction of the farm business tenancy. For all other landowners, the level of relief is set at 50%.

What if we restricted the 100% relief to landlords who let their land for five years or more, or perhaps even 10 years or more? There are obviously disadvantages for landlords in doing that, despite the advantages for the tenants, so we could offer them something in return. For example, we could give landlords who are willing to let for a longer term the ability to declare their income as trading income for tax purposes and easier mechanisms...
for ending tenancies if there is a breach of contract. Other alternatives include reforming stamp duty land tax, which currently disincentivises landlords from offering long-term tenancies, to end the discrimination against such tenancies.

The Conservative party, which I and the Minister are proud to be members of, often talks about its long-term economic plan. Will the Minister tell us what discussions he has had with tenant farming representatives and the Treasury on the possibility of making the changes I have suggested? How will those issues be dealt with in his Department’s upcoming 25-year food and farming plan? Let us make the long-term economic plan a reality in the farming industry and incentivise long-term tenancies to promote investment and economic security.

I am delighted to be a parliamentary representative for the Conservative rural affairs group, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). I recently spoke to Richard Haddock, who has just departed as chairman of the group. He said that we must work harder for the working farmer, not the landlords, because the landlords have the asset of the land and can borrow against it. If a tenant farmer wants to diversify, he does the work and takes the risk, but the landlord still takes the cut. The farmer increases the value of the landlord’s asset, but is often cheated out of many of the rewards that are owed to him.

A couple of weeks ago, the Prince’s Countryside Fund released new research showing that half of UK farmers no longer make a living from farming alone. They have to diversify to make their businesses sustainable, but diversification is a risk. Why would they take that risk if they do not know how long they are going to stay on their land and are at risk of eviction once their tenancy lease is up—especially if the landlord takes a cut from the diversification enterprise?

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): In my constituency, like my hon. Friend, many farmers are making huge strides in diversifying their incomes, whether through farm shops or holiday lettings. Does she agree that the short-term nature of some tenancy agreements inhibits such planning and diversification? Should the Government provide incentives for longer-term diversification in farms?

Nusrat Ghani: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is reading my mind—I hope to go on to that. For tenant farmers to diversify, which they have to in order to keep their business thriving, they need some assurances that they can reap the rewards of their investment in the land they take care of.

Will the Minister outline what steps the Government are taking to ensure that farmers have an incentive to diversify, so that they and the rural economy can benefit from new initiatives and enterprise? Also, how is he communicating the 25-year food and farming plan to local authorities, so that they may support tenant farmers and local businesses to survive?

In Sussex, in particular, the problem many tenant farmers face is that there is simply not enough land available to them. They want to expand, invest and diversify, but they cannot. Often, that is because they are out-competed by developers, who simply have more financial leverage with landlords. Understandably, those landlords are looking for the most profitable way in which their land can be sold. The most profitable way for the landlord, however, does not necessarily mean the most profitable way for the rural economy. Will the Minister describe the action the Government are taking to ensure an increase or, at least, to prevent a decrease in the availability of land to tenant farmers?

President Eisenhower of the United States once said: “Farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil, and you’re a thousand miles from the corn field.” He was right, of course—it is easy for us consumers to take those who are striving in green fields for granted, and to expect a steady supply of meat, vegetables and dairy products at respectable prices. The food security of our country lies on their shoulders, and the role of farmers in Sussex and elsewhere in keeping food on our table in an unstable world is vital.

In January, my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) led an important debate on food security in this Westminster Hall Chamber. He highlighted how, as the world’s population grows and with increasing unrest and conflict, as well as what may be considered fractured relationships between Russia, China and the United States, the ability of some regions to produce food that can be turned into affordable imports for us in Britain is not guaranteed. He also made the valuable point that every tonne we import is a tonne less that is available to other nations, which might not have the ability to produce as we can. So we must empower our farmers to produce, and not limit their capacity by withholding land, saddling them with excessive regulation or disincentivising them from diversifying and investing.

Views on the European Union within the farming community are mixed, but in my opinion the EU does itself no favours when it issues regulations about crop rotation and the size of a hedge to recipients of the basic payment scheme. Such regulations all cost time, money and effort, and do not help British farmers—already adhering to high standards—to achieve a competitive edge, especially when the basic payment scheme payments are delayed, as they have been. Furthermore, landlords are known to take advantage of the basic payment scheme: if they know what the farmer is receiving, they can put their rent up accordingly, meaning a higher charge for the farmer before they even start producing.

Today, I have focused on tenancy security, but tenant farmers face many challenges—tax issues and incentives, tenancy succession, encouraging new entrants with loan schemes, and the arbitration process are all causes for concern. Time does not allow me to speak about those concerns in any great depth, but they and the interests of tenant farmers should be heard. I am grateful for the opportunity to have contributed in a small way, and I hope that other Members will do the same now and in future.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate is due to finish at 4.30 pm. The recommended time limits for the Front Benchers’ speeches are five minutes each for the Scottish National party and Her Majesty’s Opposition, and 10 minutes for the Minister. Two Members are standing and have caught my eye, the first of whom is Jim Shannon.
3.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Hollobone. It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate.

I spoke to the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) last night and asked what the thrust of her opinion and thoughts would be, which she clearly outlined for me. I have prepared some notes on farming—tenant farmers in particular—and on some of the experiences I have had in Northern Ireland.

I declare an interest as a member of the Ulster Farmers Union—we are the sister body, or maybe the brother body, of the National Farmers Union. I also own a small farm in Northern Ireland. We are probably a nation of fairly small farms; most of us can remember being brought up on a farm with an average size of about 60 or 70 acres. A family was reared on it and everyone did well, but they could not do that today—it would be quite impossible—because farms are now probably, on average, closer to 200 acres.

That is just an example; I now want to make some comments and to congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this issue forward for consideration in Westminster Hall. The reason why the debate is important has been outlined very well by the hon. Lady. I am pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), in his place, and I look forward to his contribution and that of the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice). As the Minister knows, I hold him in high esteem, and not only because he is an outer in the EU campaign. I spoke to the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) last night and asked what the thrust of her comments and to congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this issue forward for consideration in Westminster Hall.

The Tenant Farmers Association is concerned that those who develop Government agricultural policy unconsciously, or unintentionally, assume that all farmers are owner-occupiers and are therefore able to make their own decisions about how to respond to Government schemes and initiatives. The reality is very different. For those farming as tenants, decisions have to be made within a more complex set of circumstances. The hon. Member for Wealden, and some of those intervening on her, outlined that; other speakers will do likewise. How a tenant farmer responds to policy will have much to do with the impact of tenancy legislation, the framework of the tenancy agreement in place and the ongoing relationship with the owner of the land being farmed. The relationship that tenant farmers have with the owner is critical. Such factors need to be taken into consideration when the Government are drafting farming policy.

Under the previous Government, there were clear examples of policy developments in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs where those landlord-tenant considerations were obviously not taken into account by those responsible for drawing up the policies. Some of the concerns have already been outlined. Those policies include the development of the agri-environment schemes, such as the higher level stewardship scheme and the uplands entry level scheme; the requirements for fixed equipment within the new nitrate vulnerable zone regulations, which cause nightmares for us all, especially around the edge of Strangford lough in Northern Ireland; rural development grants for farm diversification, which the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) referred to in his intervention; and the move to flat-rate payments under the single payment scheme.

Tenant farmers are a large and too often unaccounted-for sector of the farming community. That is why this debate is so important in highlighting and focusing attention on a sector of the agri-food industry that needs help and assistance. I very much look forward to the Minister’s response. This is a welcome opportunity to raise awareness of tenant farmers among all Members in this House, not just those in government.

I want to make some comments about Northern Ireland, which is of real relevance to this debate as it is one part of the United Kingdom where large estates and the traditional type of landlords were largely done away with—I am trying to get the right words: sometimes when I say that, people ask, “Has there been a revolution?” There has not been a revolution, but those landlords were done away with by legislative means. The process was cumulative, starting in the 1870s and the 1880s with rights, first, to compensation for improvement and, secondly, to security of tenure, the key security of tenure measure being an Irish Land Act, the Land Law (Ireland) Act 1881.

About 40% of the land in Northern Ireland is let out on 11-month lets. In our system in Northern Ireland, owner-occupiers rent to other owner-occupiers, which is quite successful. There is the potential for incoming grazers or growers to achieve tenant rights, but in reality that does not happen very often. It is simply not in the culture anymore, because things have changed—owners know to look out for that, agents are wise to it and on the whole nobody tries to outwit them.

Interestingly, we would never hear anyone taking land in Northern Ireland being referred to as a “tenant”—the word is never used and would be inappropriate. It is not a word that is in the rural culture anymore—maybe that is what we need to be thinking about in the future—and perhaps it came to be regarded as derogatory at some point, due to the historic context of tenant farming in Northern Ireland. Some farmers in Northern Ireland almost looked across to tenant farmers in England or Scotland. They did not accept their lot as tenants and are suspicious of those who did not push for the same rights at the same time—rightly or wrongly. The children of current farmers or landowners would look at things differently. There would be a period of transition, when difficulties remain, simply because interpersonal relationships were soured in many areas—that is the case with the tenant farmer and with the person who owns the land—and that would be damaging. However, there might be occasions when the opposite happened.

In Northern Ireland, the tenants who bought out their farms in the 1920s were quite happy—I use this example as a person who is in favour of foxhunting—to continue to allow foxhunting over their land, because that was a social thing and members of the community relied on it for work. Their children did not have the same ties and in some cases quickly ended the practice. If we were to see the same riffs of changes here on the mainland, there would be a transitional period—perhaps not to the same extent, but there would none the less be a move in that direction. Some people would look to quickly deal with any potential for conflict; others would use the opportunity to assert their new status in ways that they were never able to before.
I will conclude with this comment. The other big difference in Northern Ireland was that the entire landlord class was reduced in a very short time. There was not anything cynical or murderous in people’s minds, but the Land Act enabled them to buy their land and they took that opportunity. Owing to the historic context, some people obviously remained, because they had at least some in-hand farming, forestry or other land assets. Lessons have been learned. The Land Act gave farmers in Northern Ireland a chance to buy their land and to farm and work it, as they have done.

I ask the Minister to take those points on board. I support the hon. Member for Wealden. I will be the one—there may be others here—to stand up for tenant farmers and ensure that they get their rights, as they should.

3.51 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I draw hon. Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, which indicates that I am both a landowner and a farmer. I held the shadow rural affairs brief in Wales for four years and now represent my wonderful constituency of Eddisbury, which has a high proportion of dairy farms.

The important word that my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) mentioned was “flexibility”. I am sure that she will remember the days of the Agricultural Holdings Act 1986, when tenancies were inheritable from generation to generation. As someone who was involved with an Agricultural Holdings Act tenancy and saw the lack of investment—the second-generation farmer in that case was not farming the land at all; in fact, he had full-time employment elsewhere—I am sure that my hon. Friend would not want to see the abuses of the system that occurred under such tenancies.

It was for that reason that flexibility in farm business tenancies was introduced. That flexibility led to an additional 100,000 acres of land coming up for rent. That is important; in fact, from my experience in the last five years, the biggest constraint on tenants has been rent levels. That has been the biggest pressure on the system, not the length of tenancies. In fact, a very short tenancy can offer flexibility to someone who wants to expand for the short term or to a landowner or neighbouring farmer who has spare capacity because of either disease or a change of farming method. Such tenancies allow people to offer land to a neighbour on a short-term basis and give the system important flexibility.

In my experience, many landlords, if they are asked by tenant farmers, will actually sign the indemnities when that suits both parties. That is the very flexibility in operation in the farm business tenancies system. For example, a farmer may die, his widow may not have short-term arrangements in place and the children may have to return to take on the farm. The flexibility in the farm business tenancies system allows that approach; it is not there in the kind of long-term tenancies that my hon. Friend proposes.

Nusrat Ghani: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: people tend to come to us as Members of Parliament with problems rather than to say that things are going well. I have some fantastic landlords in my constituency, but I held a number of meetings at which tenant farmers said they felt they did not have the right support to negotiate longer-term tenancies; they felt uncomfortable about raising that. I am here today because they do not have the time, capacity or energy to lobby that the big farmers would.

Antoinette Sandbach: I would advise those tenants to speak to the Tenant Farmers Association, which is effective at representing its tenant farmers, as well as to the NFU and other organisations, who also provide effective representation.

I plead the cause of young farmers in particular. It is a big risk for a landowner to take an unproved tenant under 40, who may not have had their foot on the ladder before, on to their farm for a 10-year tenancy of the type that my hon. Friend proposed, but it is vital to encourage younger entrants to come forward. They have bright ideas and they want to progress, but that is a risk. The danger of the course of action that she proposes, with longer-term tenancies, is that innovation and support is stifled because the risk is too great. A 10-year commitment is also a great risk for the tenant, who will have that liability for 10 years.

My hon. Friend is in effect arguing for better representation in negotiations rather than reducing flexibility in the system. I say to the Minister that for tenant farmers in my constituency the real pressure in the system comes from the level of rents and, in particular, what has happened to dairy prices. I certainly saw livestock farmers priced out of the market when milk prices were high because high levels of rent were being asked for relatively small parcels of land, which prevented some getting on to the ladder in the livestock sector. I experienced that in north Wales and there are also high levels of rent in Eddisbury. That, rather than flexibility, is the real issue.

Diversification has risks associated with it, but again a good landlord will want to encourage a positive relationship with their tenant and the tenant will want to have a positive relationship with their landlord. When that works, there can be some really good, productive, experimental diversification programmes.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that when there is a positive, constructive relationship between the landlord and tenant, that can work in the long term? My father-in-law has been a tenant farmer with the Duchy of Cornwall for more than 50 years, which has worked well for both parties.

Antoinette Sandbach: I certainly do agree. We should focus our attention on providing support and encouraging those constructive relationships to go forward rather than on legislating to alter the lengths of tenancies. Quality and support are the two issues, and a good relationship will almost inevitably lead to an extension of tenancy agreements when that suits both parties.
If we constrict the amount of time to a minimum term of 10 years, with relief available only at that time, what happens to someone who wants to renew for another five years? Is that done from the baseline of the tenancy? What happens if someone wants to bring in a partner to farm with them? Does that count as a new tenancy? In my submission, the current system is flexible. It has wrinkles, and I do not pretend that there are not problems, but I urge caution before this place passes more legislation on farm business tenancies.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speeches, after which Nusrat Ghani will have two or three minutes to wind up the debate.

3.59 pm

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for the opportunity to participate in this debate. May I congratulate the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) on securing it? I thought she made an excellent speech on the issues at play here. It is always welcome in a Westminster Hall debate, as in any debate, when constructive ideas and suggestions are put forward. This forum seems to lend itself better to that than the main Chamber, and that is something we should all consider.

The critical nature of the length and security of tenancies is emphasised by the fact that most tenancies are shorter than the Government period for averaging out profits. That speaks volumes about the need for action. The idea of bringing a long-term plan to farming made me smile. Hopefully it is a lot better than the long-term economic plan, which is clearly a work in progress. I congratulate the hon. Lady on kicking off the debate with lots of ideas, and I have no doubt the Minister was scribbling furiously.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is always a champion for Northern Ireland. I have not yet known him to get through a speech without mentioning a union. Quite often it is in my direction, but in this case it was the European Union. I congratulate him on being, as ever, a champion of Northern Ireland and giving us that important perspective as we consider what we should do.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) emphasised the importance of flexibility, and I agree. It is not necessarily a case of one size fitting all. Whatever we do, we should always consider that protection and support are needed for landlords as well as tenants. Rents are an important issue. I fear she is slightly more laissez-faire in her approach to that than I am, and certainly more than the Scottish Government are. I would like to see a lot more action from the Government.

Tenant farming plays a vital role across the UK, but in Scotland it is of particular importance. It accounts for 1.3 million hectares, amounting to more than 18% of our land mass. However, the sector has been declining for decades and has almost halved to just 24% of farmland since 1982. The new Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 is an attempt to breathe life into tenancy and to ensure that it thrives. It is also a critical component of the Scottish Government’s drive for a fairer, more equal and more socially just Scotland. According to the Scottish Tenant Farmers Association—they are not here today, but it is rather a longer journey for them—the new Act is “the most significant reform to tenancy legislation since tenant farmers were granted security of tenure in 1948.”

A central part of the Act is ensuring fairness between tenants and landlords. The creation of a tenant farming commissioner will help with that process and, we believe, improve relations. There will also be a much fairer and more transparent system of rent reviews; improvements in end-of-tenancy compensation; a broadening of the class of relative entitled to succeed to a tenancy; and the creation of an exit route for 1991 tenants to assign their tenancies to new entrants or other farmers if the landlord does not want to buy them out. Assignations are a central feature of the Act, which seeks to protect them while accepting that it is an ongoing process that needs to be subject to regular review.

By taking those evolutionary and common-sense steps, the legislation will bring real and meaningful land reform, which will restore confidence to the sector, address many of the issues faced by tenant farmers and bring vibrancy and certainty. At the same time, and contrary to the claims of some, it should not deter landlords from providing new tenancies and will not materially disadvantage them.

Tenant farming and land reform will always be works in progress, but the Act is a highly positive step forward in Scotland. It will hopefully encourage investment in the sector, address long-standing concerns, build confidence and make our legislation fit for the 21st century. Tenant farmers deserve certainty, security and fairness. That needs to be embedded in legislation, and that is what we are doing in Scotland. Hopefully lessons can be learned for the rest of the UK too.

4.4 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) for her strong introduction to the debate. I also thank colleagues who have intervened and made contributions. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke powerfully on tenant farmers in Ulster, and the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) emphasised the difficulty of high levels of rent for farmers, particularly in the north-west.

Tenant farmers are often the ties that bind together agriculture in the UK. They deserve peace of mind and security so that they can make their living in a fair and environmentally sustainable way. It is vital that the Government take a long, hard look at the relationship between landlord and tenant. With their upcoming 25-year plan, they could either usher in a new era for tenant farming or leave too many high and dry.

I appreciate the strong views of the Tenant Farmers Association and its campaign. It is rightly defending its members from abuse from landowners and from uncertain futures. I equally note the Country Land and Business Association’s position that some of the ideas suggested to protect tenant farmers may lead to reduced land stock. That is why the Government’s food and farming plan is so important. They must gather the evidence needed and bring in the right measures to make the tenant-landlord relationship a positive one.
The Farming Minister has said that longer tenancies for farming businesses are important to provide security, investment and growth. Will he tell us what the 25-year plan will do to help tenant farmers and landlords? For instance, county council farm estates are an increasingly painful issue for tenant farmers which the Government need to address. Herefordshire Council has become the latest to sell off its estates—land that provided a good entry point for young farmers. Unfortunately, the council has committed to selling that land, evicting 42 tenants in the process. The Landworkers’ Alliance said in April that 219 farms had been sold by councils since 2010. As the Farming Minister described those sales as a tragedy, will he detail what long-term steps the Government are taking to support and protect those vital estates and their tenants?

Another area the Government need to protect is the environment and the role of the tenant farmer as a steward. Farmers incentivised to invest will work on better land and choose long-term health over short-term gain. That is why I was pleased to see a statutory instrument passed recently that widened compensation for tenant farmers for soil improvements. If we recognise that good stewardship is bolstered by secure tenancy, why has DEFRA separated its plans for the environment from its food and farming strategy? Will the Minister assure us that those plans will be closely integrated in what the Department hopes to achieve?

One such mechanism for the good care of land is the much trumpeted countryside stewardship scheme, yet last year’s effort was branded “not fit for purpose”, with farmers complaining about large amounts of bureaucracy and an IT system that failed to deliver. Only 2,314 applications were made, but 8,000 had been expected. The Government say they have made efforts to make the scheme more attractive and workable this year, but those measures will count for nothing if there is not a vastly improved take-up. Will the Minister give us an early indication of expected take-up for the scheme and whether it will match last year’s target?

Tenant farmers need peace of mind and land tenure that helps them build their business. They need county councils that work with the TFA and the NFU to develop an estates strategy that helps young farmers get a head start. Finally, they need a Government who deliver on their promise of a countryside stewardship programme that works.

4.8 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusarat Ghani) on securing this important debate. It is an issue that I have followed closely as Farming Minister over the past two and a half years. She is absolutely right: tenant farmers have a vital role to play in our countryside. Roughly one third of farms and one third of the land we have is tenanted. Farm tenancies are a vital route for new entrants coming into the industry. They help existing businesses expand and take on new land, and they are essential because the prohibitively high capital cost of land is a real bar and obstacle to new people entering the industry.

Every industry needs new talent, fresh thinking and new ways of doing things. Farming is no exception. In our 25-year food and farming plan, we will consider how to encourage alternative models of doing business in farming so that we do not think just about landowners, owner-occupiers and tenant farmers, but look at ways of expanding some of the contract farming models that have been very successful. Perhaps farmers could progress to share farming models where they have a stake in a business and earn in the business before taking on their own tenancy and perhaps even buying land at the end.

I come back to the crucial farm business tenancies. It is important to remember why they were introduced. The deregulatory measure was taken in 1995 because there was real concern that, as my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) said, not enough land was coming to the market and that was restrictive and acting as a barrier. The burdens and obligations in the Agricultural Holdings Act 1986 prevented land from coming to the market but, generally speaking, the Agricultural Tenancy Act 1995 was judged a success. Between 1996 and 2003, 35,000 acres a year came on to the market. That has stabilised since and things have not changed as much, but it was undoubtedly successful in deregulating and bringing more land to the market, creating more opportunities.

However, I am aware that the Tenants Farmers Association and others have expressed concerns about the average length of some tenancies. Currently, they are around three and a half years. A couple of years ago they were around three years and have gone up slightly. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden pointed out, the challenge of having such short-term tenancies is clear. If someone has tenure of the land for only three years, they do not have the incentive to invest in that land.

I worked in the farming industry for 10 years and grew up on a farm. I know that if someone takes on a piece of land that has not been farmed adequately or properly for a period of years, it can take four or five years to turn it around and get the land back to its full potential by investing and putting on farmyard manure, and adding fertilisers, sand or lime to bring the soil to its full productive potential. That takes time and if someone is there for only three and a half years it can fuel short-termism, which is not good for the quality of our soils. We should be concerned about soil in agriculture because it is at the heart of everything we do and we must protect it.

We are interested in finding ways to incentivise longer term tenancies without losing the benefits of flexibility in farm business tenancies. I have had numerous discussions with agricultural lawyers and land agents, and with representatives from the Tenants Farmers Association and the Country Land and Business Association. The last two do not always see eye to eye on this issue, frankly. I recently met representatives from a selection of county farms around the country. I share the concern expressed by the shadow Minister about the potential loss of some county farms. About a month ago, we had an interesting session with representatives to discuss how to refresh that model in a way that recognises some of the pressures on local authorities.

The Government have no fixed view on the need for change to legislation or otherwise. Many of the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden are for the Treasury and she might want to have conversations with Treasury Ministers. The area is complex and I am mindful of the points raised by my hon. Friend the
Member for Eddisbury that we must be careful when making changes that we do not create unintended consequences. Having caveated what I am going to say with those crucial points, I want to explain the context and texture of my discussions with some of the leading experts in the field and some of the ideas that we could consider.

The first thing to recognise is that although the average length of a farm business tenancy is three and a half years, there is a big division between bare land, which people rent for a short-term crop—perhaps potatoes—for a couple of years and a farm that has a farmstead, a yard and a house where people live. The average length of a tenancy of a farm with a farmstead is more than eight years, which is much closer to the 10 years that the Tenant Farmers Association is calling for.

The other thing to bear in mind is that short-term lets are important for some business models. Even in my part of the world—Cornwall—businesses often specialise in particular areas. Some may specialise in brassica crops—cauliflowers and cabbages—which can be grown on the land for only two to three years before a new rotation must come in. Often, a potato grower will follow for a period and a daffodil grower will follow that. Finally, when the land has been hammered for a few years of intensive cropping, a cattle farmer comes in and puts it into grazing for the best part of a decade. That model can work and can suit some farm enterprises.

I have had discussions with the Tenant Farmers Association about agricultural property relief. I subsequently had discussions with Treasury officials about the TFA’s proposal and I helped to facilitate a meeting between George Dunn, its chief executive, and Treasury officials to discuss his ideas further. The officials told me they will consider these ideas and feed back their thoughts to me. I am still awaiting that feedback. They have obviously been busy with the Budget recently, but I look forward to having their feedback about whether it is a good thing or not because it is a policy area for them. There is a danger that such a measure could restrict the market and that less land could come to the market for the agribusinesses that value flexibility.

A second matter raised was stamp duty land tax. Tenant farmers and landowners agree that they would like changes. Again, this is an issue for the Treasury, but the challenge is that the longer the term of the tenancy, the higher its value and the more likely it is to trip over the threshold for SDLT.

I have received proposals about considering the law on rules of forfeiture of farm business tenancies. At the moment, if there is a breach of a covenant, the only option open to the landlord is to go for full forfeiture, which is quite a high hurdle to clear in a court. That makes landlords nervous about longer-term tenancies and makes them more likely to go for a shorter term tenancy because there is less risk. One suggestion is that we might be able to borrow some of the other remedies and tenancies in the Agricultural Holdings Act 1986 and have options and measures that fall short of full forfeiture—for example, an enforcement notice to get a covenant in a tenancy abided by.

I have received some suggestions about borrowing elements of commercial property tenancies with a right to renew, which would stop short of longer tenancies but might create some sort of soft presumption that someone who has been a good tenant for a three-year term should have priority to renew that tenancy—again, a right to renew rather than being held to ransom for a higher rent. Again, that is an interesting idea that I am keen to consider, although I have heard mixed opinions about how significant a change that would be and whether it would have much impact.

Going into more detail in these areas, I have had representations to repeal section 31 of the Agricultural Tenancies Act 1995. Under the Law of Property Act 1925, there has been a statutory right for a landowner to create a tenancy on their land. They did not have to have the permission of any moneylender who had a charge over that land to do so because it was deemed important that land was kept in productive capacity and that the interests of banks and moneylenders should not be placed ahead of food production for the country. Some debt lobbying by the British Bankers Association in 1995 resulted in a change to the flagship Law of Property Act 1925, which undermined landowners’ ability to put a tenancy on their land to the extent that to create a tenancy they now need prior permission from someone with a charge on that asset if that is in the mortgage deed.

The shadow Minister referred to county farms. There has been concern about those, particularly in Herefordshire, which prompted me to set up some discussions. The Agriculture Act 1970 gives DEFRA a role to work with local authorities to help them to refine their plans and I am considering that. We cannot block them from selling those assets—they have a statutory right to do that—but we have a role to play in working with them on any plans for reorganisation of their county farms. That is why I am keen to have discussions with them about how we can try to refresh the model and make it a real option for new entrants to the industry.

I want to give my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden a chance to come back on some of these issues, but on contract farming, there are some interesting models out there that enable new entrants, who perhaps do not have a huge amount of capital behind them, to get access and set up a new business. I will give just one example of the kind of thing that we are looking at in our food and farming plan. Tulip, which is a very large pig producer that accounts for about 20% of all pig production in this country, runs a system called franchise farming, whereby it owns the units and gives access to its science and veterinary expertise. But on each unit it has a franchise farmer, who basically runs the unit for a fee, for a contract per pig completed, with all sorts of performance-related pay. That is a great way to give young people who want to farm, but have no capital behind them, the first stepping stone into the industry. It is also a model that can lead to better knowledge transfer and access to technology.

My final point, therefore, is that as we think about the future of farming in this country, we perhaps need to move beyond the traditional notion of tenancies and land ownership and look at some of those other, more creative models, which may actually have far more promise for new people trying to get into the industry.
Nusrat Ghani: I thank the Farming Minister for his response. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) for talking about diversification. Farmers do much more than till the soil on their land, and they have to diversify their businesses. I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I do not think that a debate could take place in this Chamber without his support or intervention, and his passion was a delight to hear. To my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), I say that I am not proposing that we legislate for longer-term tenancies. What I want us to do—I think that the Minister alluded to this—is to incentivise landlords to offer longer-term tenancies, and make it easier for tenant farmers to try to negotiate those better deals. Quite often we talk about the importance of food security, but we do not offer support for the farmers who are providing that.

I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response. I now need to move on and speak to the Treasury, but my local tenant farmers will be reassured by some of his comments today. I would also like to place it on the record that I have been a Member of Parliament for about 11 months and every time I have approached the Farming Minister, he has made himself available. We have had two very large meetings with the Conservative Rural Affairs Group, and he is due to meet members of the East Sussex farming business community, who will no doubt pick up all the points that he has not covered in this debate. I hope that they will challenge him and push him even further.

My final point is that I come from a delightful constituency, with a huge number of landlords and tenants farming, but I feel that there is some nervousness about raising the concerns of tenant farmers who are not new entrants into the market. They are not young people; they have been farming for quite a while and they struggle to move their business from site to site. I would like to work with the Minister on ensuring that we can provide them with as much help as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered tenant farming.
Domestic Violence Refuges

9.30 am

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Domestic Violence Refuges.

Domestic violence is violence or abuse inflicted in the home by one adult on another, often in the context of an intimate relationship. It may be psychological, physical, sexual, emotional or a combination of these. I acknowledge that men may also be victims, but I intend to focus today on domestic violence against women and the support that is available in refuges.

It is important to consider the scale of the problem. The Office for National Statistics revealed that in the last year domestic violence accounted for 16% of all violent crime and that 1.4 million women were victims. One in five children witnessed domestic violence and 62% of children living with domestic violence are directly harmed by the perpetrator, in addition to the harm caused by witnessing the abuse of others. Perhaps most shocking is the fact that two women are murdered in Britain every week by their partner or former partner. I am sure all hon. Members agree that that is appalling. These women need the Government’s support.

The problem is not new. Back in 1874, Frances Power Cobbe wrote a paper, “Wife Torture in England”. When the then Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, read it, he apparently wept and promised there would be an inquiry. There was an inquiry, but the sad fact is that nothing of substance happened until 1971, when Erin Pizzey opened the first women’s refuge.

Jenny Smith was an early beneficiary of Erin Pizzey’s refuge in Chiswick. I was moved when I heard her speak recently of the abuse she endured at the hands of her mentally unstable husband. The early 1970s was a time when domestic violence was rarely mentioned. Jenny Smith endured vicious beatings, knifings, burns, bites and attempted drowning. One day, she saw a tiny newspaper ad with a phone number offering help. She plucked up the courage to call and within hours she had left her home in Hackney, east London, and was standing outside the women’s refuge, an ordinary terraced house in west London, with her seven-month-old daughter on one arm and her 23-month-old at her side. She was safe.

Instead of receiving support, victims of domestic violence are often criticised. How often do we hear: “It’s her own fault; she should have left him”? That is easy to say, but we must remember that, apart from the physical difficulty of escaping from a controlling, violent partner, women who have been abused, beaten and degraded have little confidence. Their self-esteem is at rock bottom. Sandra Horley, chief executive of Refuge, said:

“Domestic violence is one of the only crimes where it can feel like the victim is being punished, rather than the perpetrator. Even with the full force of the law in place, there are many cases when a woman is not safe in her own home and where her ex-partner is determined to seek revenge. We know of women who have been too scared to leave their heavily locked homes to go to the shops, or who have sprinkler systems installed in case their former partner tries to burn the house down. They become prisoners. And when they do try to break free? We know of one woman who recently left her home to go to the shops, only to be followed by her abusive ex-partner. He viciously attacked and raped her to show that he was always watching, always in control.”

Women’s refuges play a crucial role. They are so much more than a roof over a head. Lives are transformed as specialist refuge workers support women to stay safe and access health services and legal advocacy, and provide immigration advice. Most important of all, refuges are safe places in anonymous, secret locations where women can be sure they will not be tracked down by a violent partner. Refuges provide an invaluable service for those who need it most. Without adequate refuge provision, women experiencing domestic violence will be faced with a stark choice: flee to live rough on the streets or remain with their abuser and risk further violence or even worse.

Earlier this year, the Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice, the hon. Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), said in a written answer:

“Under this Government, there are more refuge places than ever before.”—[Official Report, 8 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 130W.] The hon. Lady is mistaken. Under this Conservative Government, 17% of refuges have been forced to close because of funding cuts. Erin Pizzey said recently:

“The closing down of refuges over the last two years is a source of great worry for me. The majority of women coming into my refuge needed long-term therapeutic care with their children”. Despite two women being killed every week by domestic violence in our country, unprecedented funding cuts to local authorities mean refuges are being closed one by one, ending essential services that provide victims of domestic violence with a safe space, support, healthcare and everything else needed to rebuild a life shattered by abuse.

The amount of money allocated to women’s refuges is not ring-fenced or protected by the Government. Instead, the majority of funding comes from local authorities. As they have been subject to drastic cuts, cash-strapped councils have been forced to close many refuges. Despite their life-or-death importance, refuges are often one of the first front-line services to go. In addition to the places that have been shut down altogether, many have been radically cut, with new time limits on length of stay. Research by Women’s Aid shows that 30% of the 145 domestic violence services asked said they expected to get 30% less funding than last year and a shocking 17% said they did not know whether they would get any local authority funding at all.

On top of that, 48% of 167 domestic violence services in England said they were running services without any funding. Devon has been particularly badly hit by cuts and there are no refuges left. In my area, Lancashire County Council needs to save a further £262 million over the next four years, so it will no longer provide funding for the non-statutory part of the Supporting People budget. This funding is essential if we are to retain Lancashire’s nine refuges, which provide a lifeline for victims of domestic abuse across the county. In my constituency, 1,530 domestic abuse incidents were reported to the police in the last year. Many of the women admitted to the refuge were assessed to be at high risk of...
serious harm or homicide. When they escaped, they brought their babies, children and young people with them.

Even before the latest round of funding cuts, demand for refuge accommodation far outstripped supply. At this time, when all the evidence shows that we need more refuges, Government funding cuts are forcing them to close. It is a fact that without long-term sustainable funding many more refuges will close and others will be forced to make experienced, trained staff redundant. Consequently, they will become little more than hostels. This is another worrying outcome. According to Women’s Aid:

“The tendency towards funding generic rather than specialist domestic violence services will result in the loss of 35 years of acquired expertise in relation to domestic violence.”

Currently, fewer than one in 10 local authorities run specialist domestic violence services and 32 of the domestic violence services that have closed since 2010 were specialist services for black and minority ethnic women. The closure of these services is dangerous for all women, particularly those who rely on specialist domestic violence services, such as women of colour or trans women.

Escaping domestic violence is a traumatising and emotional process. These women have specific needs that are often not catered for by generic domestic violence services. It is vital that when an abused woman tries to escape from her abuser, she has somewhere to go. Many of the refuges that remain open have been forced to reduce their capacity, and Women’s Aid reports that 6,337 of the 20,000-plus women looking for help at a refuge were turned away last year. The most dangerous point of an abusive relationship is when women try to leave. Before embarking on an escape, they need to know that they have somewhere to go, because being forced to return to their abuser is unthinkable dangerous.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on obtaining the debate and pay tribute to Women’s Aid, which does tremendous work in my constituency. Does she agree that one difficulty in the past has been the reporting of domestic violence, whether it be sexual or another type of violence? In my area, we found that domestic violence was not separated from social violence; the figures were not there. We have now managed to achieve that and are seeing the true figure, and I have seen a big increase in domestic violence in my constituency during the past 12 months. It is important that it is reported.

Julie Cooper: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I totally agree: the first step to tackling domestic violence is ensuring that it is recognised and reported as such.

Another worrying effect of the funding cuts is that many local authorities are introducing local connection rules, meaning that only local women can access support. When refuges are not permitted to take women from outside their area, women whose safety depends on their putting distance between themselves and the world of their abuser have nowhere to go.

The Government actions to cut local authority budgets mean that there is no longer any sustainable funding for women’s refuges. The Government’s actions are shamefully irresponsible. In March 2015, the Government provided £10 million for domestic violence services to support the national network of specialist refuges and, in December 2015, a further £3 million of funding for domestic violence support. That additional emergency funding for specialist domestic violence services was welcomed, but it is no substitute for the provision of long-term, sustainable funding.

I am pleased that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), has confirmed, in answer to a question from me, that the Government intend to provide “£80 million of dedicated funding up to 2020 to tackle violence against women and girls. This funding will provide core support for refuges and other accommodation-based services, a network of rape support centres and national helplines”.

I was also pleased to hear that in April 2017 a new violence against women and girls service transformation fund will be introduced. That fund will “support local programmes which encourage new approaches that incorporate early intervention, establish and embed the best ways to help victims and their families, and prevent perpetrators from re-offending.”

The Minister said that the criteria for applications to the fund “will be published in due course.”

That announcement raises more questions than it answers. When exactly will the application process open? When will the criteria be announced? How much of that funding will refuges be able to access? Will the funds made available be enough to prevent any more closures?

Does the Minister here today know how urgent the situation is? Is he mindful of the fact that two women are murdered every day? Many of the refuges are the difference between life and death and they are set to close. Without clearly defined, sustainable funding, other refuges will be forced to shed staff—staff who already have the expertise to know the best ways to help victims.

I hope that in his response to the debate the Minister will provide answers to those important questions. I also hope that he will let the Chancellor of the Exchequer know that at the end of every cut he makes to local authorities, there is a woman who will die, avoidably, at the hands of a man who once promised to love her. Cuts to public spending are creating orphans who could have grown up with parents. I beg the Minister to ensure that this Government do not unravel 40 years of good work. I beg him to listen and to act without delay.

Several hon. Members rose—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. This is obviously an enormously important subject that concerns people’s lives and deaths. A large number of hon. Members—10—have applied to speak. I therefore ask them to confine their remarks to five minutes. I hope to start calling the Front-Bench spokespersons at half-past 10.

9.44 am

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies. I rise to speak about only one thing—the need for an exemption for women’s refuges from the rules surrounding the reduction in housing benefit. The Government are
kicking the can down the road for now—in fact, they have kicked the can down the road every year for the past seven years, so they are saying, “Let’s keep on kicking it.” But in 2017, unless refuges are exempt from the reduction in housing benefit, there will be an enormous reduction in refuge beds across the country. Even if nothing else comes out of today and these weeks when we are talking about the Housing and Planning Bill and our benefit systems, I beg the Government to exempt refuges.

The money that the Minister will no doubt say at the end of the debate the Government are putting into refuges will be completely and utterly wasted and useless without housing benefit. As someone who has run 18 different women’s refuges, I know what a balance sheet for a refuge looks like, and I can tell the Minister what will happen without housing benefit. The £10 million was allocated well, as my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) pointed out, and no one will criticise that allocation. However, I saw at least one third of the applications that went in, and I know that every single one had in its business plan that the sustainability of the refuge would be based entirely on housing benefit-plus. The Government signed off on a load of documents, agreeing the sustainability plans of organisations up and down the country, based on a premise that they were about to completely and utterly undo by reducing housing benefit.

It is complicated and difficult for people to understand what running a refuge actually looks like. The grants that the Government give are what we use to pay for staff. They are used to pay for a family support worker, who will enable a child to re-engage with a mother who has had no control over their relationship because her control has been completely stripped away by a perpetrator of violence. They allow key staff to give counselling and support to women who have been brutally raped, beaten, kept locked away and controlled to a degree that no one in this Chamber could ever imagine. That is what the grants from the Government pay for.

What pays for the nuts, the bolts, the beds, the buildings, the place where people live, their home, and their security is housing benefit. The reduction will directly and entirely damage what refuge providers use to pay for things such as CCTV, security support and all the extra stuff that people do not have in their house but might need if they have been ritually raped for the last six months of their life. That is what housing benefit pays for. I cannot say this with any more dramatic effect: half of the refuges that I ran, and half of the hundreds of beds that I used to manage at Sandwell Women’s Aid, would not be there without housing benefit. Already, 115 women and their children are turned away from refuges every single day in this country. Already this year, in 2016—it is only the beginning of May—46 women are dead.

I want almost nothing else; I just want to hear that the Government will permanently exempt refuges and support accommodation from universal credit, from the changes to housing benefit and from the rules on localisation. I am pleased to say that one of the women who lived in my refuge managed successfully, with the Child Poverty Action Group, to take the Government to court and win back her local support allowance for council tax benefit and local crisis money. She had been told that she was not allowed to have that because she had not lived in the area. She had lived in the neighbouring borough, a metre over the border in Birmingham, but she did not have a local connection thanks to the delegation of rules. The Government did not give in. They were forced to by the courts.

Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that if the cuts go ahead, society picks up the cost elsewhere, including in health circles? Women and children turn up at A&E units, GPs dole out antidepressants, and there is the cost of counselling. There is a cost to children’s education, and future opportunities are lost. Families who move between bed and breakfasts or are in insecure homes end up in debt. There is a human cost, as children do not enjoy the love, support and parental guidance that so many of us take for granted. Without that guidance, they may well get into trouble. Does my hon. Friend agree that society will pick up a far bigger cost if the cuts go ahead?

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Thank you for that short speech, Ms Phillips, could you begin to wind up?

Jess Phillips: I will. Not only do I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Marie Rimmer); it is a fact. We must do something and act sensibly by exempting refuges. We know it is going to be done, so we should just do it today so that refuges can look at their budgets for next year and not have to offer redundancy to brilliant staff—every single year, staff are put on notice. Let us allow refuges to thrive and to do the job that they are better at than we are.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I would like hon. Members to keep their speeches to less than five minutes—ideally four minutes. May I ask Jim Shannon to set the precedent we need?

9.51 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I will attempt to keep within my five minutes, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) on securing the debate.

Domestic violence is a massive issue in Northern Ireland, as my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) indicated. Refuges cater for women who are alone and for those with children. The length of stay depends on the needs of each woman and her children. Our refuges are run by and for women and children suffering domestic violence. We often remember the women, but we must remember their families and children as well.

There are currently 12 Women’s Aid refuges across Northern Ireland. They are modern and well appointed, and some have been purpose-built. Children’s workers plan an ongoing programme of play and social activities. I want the Minister to know how important the Women’s Aid refuges are across Northern Ireland, and indeed across the whole United Kingdom.

Many women stay in refuges more than once as part of a process of ending a relationship with an abusive partner. Refuge addresses are kept confidential to protect women’s safety, and women can choose whether to stay in a refuge close to their home or further away. The refuge that caters for women in North Down and Ards is well used, and I have referred many ladies to it.
Northern Ireland’s 24-hour domestic and sexual violence helpline can help victims find suitable refuge accommodation to meet their specific needs, such as location, size of room, accessibility, children's requirements and so on. Some Women’s Aid groups provide move-on houses, which we provide in Northern Ireland—I am sure it is done here on the mainland as well—as a temporary option for women and children who are preparing to move on from living in a refuge.

Domestic abuse is an incident of threatening behaviour or violence, which can be physical, sexual, psychological or financial. Sometimes the abuse comes in many of those forms—maybe all of them together. Every one of those types of behaviour can happen over a long period of time.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My hon. Friend is outlining a whole series of incidents, which we all recognise. Does he agree that the Minister and the Department need to give the courts a message to ensure that the perpetrators know that such activity is totally and utterly unacceptable? The courts need to crack down resolutely on the perpetrators.

Jim Shannon: As always, my hon. Friend brings an extra element to the debate. Yes, the courts need to be robust and hand out sentences that are appropriate given the harm that perpetrators have caused.

Age, gender, race and sexuality do not matter, nor does how much someone earns or where they come from; anyone can suffer abuse. Everyone has the right to live free from abuse and fear. Victims in Northern Ireland can contact the domestic violence helpline, a local refuge or other domestic abuse support services.

The Northern Domestic Violence Partnership is a multi-agency partnership of local organisations that provide services to victims of domestic violence and abuse. Collectively, the agencies involved are tasked by the regional steering group on domestic violence to translate the regional strategy into local actions. The NDVP has developed “The Bigger Picture”, a resource manual that outlines a range of activities and services available to support people living with domestic or sexual abuse in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area. It provides the information that is needed when it is needed.

Although domestic violence mainly affects women, we must remember that men can be affected as well. They may be affected to a much lesser degree, but they are affected. There are more forms of domestic abuse than those that we might think of immediately. Financial abuse, for example, is a method of control by withholding finances, and it often involves a perpetrator withholding joint finances from a victim. That can leave victims hungry and isolated, and with restricted mobility, which adds up to a clear case of domestic violence.

Physical violence, although not necessarily the most common form of abuse, is the most commonly recognised form of domestic abuse. Some violent attacks can lead to victims going to hospital. Such physical activity can hurt, frighten, degrade or humiliate someone.

The organisations involved in providing refuges do fantastic work, using volunteers and donations from the public, which reflects the general public’s desire for refuge services to be fit for purpose. However, that should not take the onus off the Government to ensure refuges are given the maximum support. Despite the tight economic conditions, refuges and associated organisations must be given the support they deserve.

Several hon. Members rose—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. I am imposing a four-minute time limit.

9.56 am

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) for securing the debate, which means a lot to me personally.

I asked in business questions whether we could have a debate on funding for domestic violence refuges, simply because the hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) claimed in Prime Minister’s questions that Lancashire County Council had closed down nine women’s refuges, which I knew not to be the case. I was so concerned about that misrepresentation of the facts that I asked for a debate.

The response from the Leader of the House was disappointing. The gist of it was, “Well, you’re a shadow Minister. You have contacts. Arrange your own debate.” It was a disappointing response and negated the whole point of business questions. However, I do have contacts and friends, and I am proud to stand here among my Labour colleagues and really pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley has brought the debate to the House.

I spoke to a contact of mine who is a Lancashire county councillor, who commented on the statement made by the hon. Member for Pendle, saying:

“It’s a shameful exploitation of an awful case. Funding is being changed so it’s more targeted. We have nine refuges and none will close. The Tories didn’t have an issue with it at the budget.”

What has actually happened in Lancashire is that the Government have pulled the “Supporting People” money, which means that the grant to refuges has been reduced. The refuges are run by charities. The county council has plugged the gap for this year, but it is looking at other funding streams for next year to keep those vital services open. That is the reality.

When I was a councillor, I was a trustee of a women’s domestic violence refuge service. I saw for myself what my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) pointed out—the hand-to-mouth existence of people in refuges where there is an over-reliance on volunteers. The problem is with paying staff wages at the end of the month, which my domestic violence service struggled to do a number of times.

Refuges are a vital service. I have come here to say just one thing: providing domestic violence services and refuges should be made a statutory duty for councils, and the money should be ring-fenced so that it does not get spent elsewhere. Domestic violence services save millions of pounds of costs to the police and the NHS. It is vital that the Government take action now, make providing domestic violence services a statutory duty for all councils, and fund them properly.
Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) on securing this debate. In its 2014-15 annual report, the charity Refuge said that it assists more than 3,000 women and children on any given day throughout the UK, but how many women living in abusive situations do not or cannot get help? Ellie Hutchinson of Scottish Women’s Aid said: “We believe there are no hard to reach groups, only hard to reach services.”

I will talk about two women who have found it not just hard to reach but impossible to access domestic violence services even when places are available, and even when—at least until 2017, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) said—housing benefit is still available. Amy was subjected to systematic domestic violence over several years. Her husband saw her as her possession. She was his punching bag after a hard day at work. She finally contacted local authorities, charities and the police, but she was unable to get housing benefit. No one could help her escape, so she did not. Right now, she might be sitting at home with a burst lip, a bruised back and an eye she cannot see out of. Who knows? Nobody knows, and nobody can help her.

Janice was a prisoner at home, and she was psychologically, physically and verbally abused over a long period of time. She was told by her own family that she had made her bed and so she had better lie in it. She sought help once. She searched online and made secretive phone calls to plan ways to escape, all the time terrified that her husband would find out what she was up to, but she had to know who would take her and her children in when she could not access public funds and had no money of her own. The answer was nobody. Nobody could help her. The charities cannot exist on fresh air alone, which is all she had to give. Janice has now given up and has resigned herself to that life of torture.

Why have Amy and Janice had to remain in abusive marriages? Why are they not entitled to financial support to gain places in refuges? It is because Amy is not called “Amy”—her name is Zinia. And Janice is not called “Janice”—her name is Maryam. Those two women have one thing in common: their entitlement to stay in the UK is not settled. They are both entirely dependent on their abusive partner. They are not entitled to public funds without their partner’s say so. Therefore, they are not entitled to housing benefit, and they are not entitled to escape violent situations at home, even if a refuge has a place for them. UK immigration laws do not permit refuges to help such women, for Zinia—or Amy—is an asylum seeker. She was advised by her lawyer that, unless she could prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the abuse had occurred, it was “best not to mention it” and that it would likely affect her credibility when making an asylum claim in her own right, because the Home Office requires absolute proof.

If the Minister agrees that women’s refuges in the UK should be available to all women, will he do as his ministerial colleague did in a previous Westminster Hall debate a couple of weeks ago and agree to make representations to colleagues in the Home Office so that domestic violence refuges can be available, at least in principle, to all victims, regardless of where they were born, and certainly not on the say so of their violent husbands whom they are fleeing?

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) for bringing this issue to the House’s attention. My experience before becoming a Member of Parliament was partly in music, but I also spent 26 years doing work on violence against women and girls. Today, I will specifically focus on one particular group of women, those involved in prostitution.

Some 80,000 people in this country, mostly women and girls, are involved in prostitution. Fifty per cent of them have been raped or sexually assaulted, and 95% of women in street prostitution have severe drug problems. Fifty per cent of off-street prostituted women are migrants, usually trafficked. Women in prostitution are 18 times more likely to be murdered than other women. They are also at risk from their partners—who are often, although not always, pimps—their pumps, their traffickers and their clients. They are frequently in and out of a criminal justice system that penalises them, rather than the men who abuse them. They are suffering from mental health difficulties, for which they are unable to get help, and their drug problems often go untreated.

There is a parallel with domestic violence. Women were often accused of staying with their abusive partners, of choosing the abuse, and they still are, as hon. Members have mentioned. Women who are both living with an abusive partner and suffering violence at work as a prostituted woman are also often accused of making a choice to be in that situation, which is focusing attention on the wrong place. We need to be focusing on the perpetrators, but to do that properly we need adequate support for women involved in prostitution.

Eaves, one of the few services in London that specialised in services for women involved in prostitution, has sadly had to close due to cuts to funding. In my constituency of Bristol West, One25 does lots of fantastic work to support, help and advise women involved in prostitution. It works in partnership with St Mungo’s for women who are homeless, and it has a diverse source of funding to try to keep itself going, but like any other voluntary organisation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) said, without core funding it is frequently unstable, which means that the women who need its help and support are at risk.

Such women have complex needs. They are hard to help, and they may often be difficult to engage, or just difficult, but that does not mean that they do not deserve our help and protection. What does it say about us as a country, and about our approach to gender equality, if we continue to allow women to be bought and sold, and then abused? At work, bakers are required to bake and bus drivers are required to drive a bus. If a woman involved in prostitution is told by her client or pimp to have sex or to do certain sexual acts that she does not want to do and is then forced to do them, she has been raped. There is simply no other job like that. It is not a job like any other; it is a job in which rape and sexual and physical assault are a daily, constant and present threat. There is no other job like it.

I would like to see the report on ending demand by the all-party parliamentary group on prostitution and the global sex trade to be seriously considered by the Government but, for today, I urge the Minister to
consider funding for this specific group of women. We cannot allow them just to be left by the wayside. We cannot allow them and their children to be left unprotected. It is too important for that, and I beg the Minister to think seriously about this specific group of women.

10.7 am

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I am pleased to take part in today’s debate, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) for securing it. I have spoken in previous debates on violence against women, including on the role that men can play in ending violence against women. This is the first occasion on which I have been able to discuss in detail—four minutes’ worth of detail, anyway—the support that is offered to survivors of domestic and sexual violence.

The point at which someone decides to leave a violent relationship is one of the most critical points in their life and in the lives of their children. It is vital that adequate support is available to everyone at the moment they decide to leave such a relationship. Often the availability of such support will be the deciding factor in whether the abused actually leaves their abuser.

In previous debates, I have debated the issue fairly and commended the UK Government, which is not easy for a Scottish nationalist, for the progress they have made in addressing domestic and sexual violence. The most pressing issue for refuges is the capping of the local housing allowance in the social sector. Let us give the Chancellor the benefit of the doubt. I do not believe he made the policy announcement during the spending review with a complete understanding of the consequences that capping would have on refuges. He has bought himself some time by delaying the introduction of the cap but, whether the consequences were unintended or otherwise, he must fix it now. The policy completely ignores the additional costs borne by our local refuge support centres.

The Scottish Government’s Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners’ Rights, Alex Neil, categorically said in a letter to the UK Government:

“Without the existing levels of housing benefit to cover these costs, refuges will be forced to close.”

Refuges are vital services that must be protected. Not for the first time in his ideological austerity drive, the Chancellor has proved that he knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing, which is simply not good enough. I am keen to find out from the Minister what analysis, if any, the Government have carried out on the wider implications of this policy.

The last few years have been difficult and challenging for domestic abuse service providers who operate in England. According to Women’s Aid, between 2010 and 2014 there was a 17% reduction in the number of refuges run by dedicated domestic abuse service providers and—shamefully—a third of all refuge referrals are turned away due to lack of capacity. The Government must ensure that capacity is built back up and that no one who is abused is turned away from the support that they seek.

One such group looking to add capacity in my neck of the woods—in Renfrewshire—is a newly formed charity called Jubilee House, which I was proud to help launch at an event late last year. The charity is currently converting a large property into a refuge for women and children, and I am very much looking forward to speaking at the Jubilee House charity gala in Erskine on 27 May: the last few tickets are still available.

It goes without saying that we all want to see violence against women eradicated from our society. The turnout for this debate shows the commitment that we all have to achieving that goal. In recent months, we have held numerous debates on this topic and we have all committed ourselves to working in partnership. However, an important feature of working together is to act as a critical friend, and I hope that my contribution to this debate will be taken in that manner. The Chancellor is making false choices, and in doing so he has failed to acknowledge the vital services that will be lost or eroded as a result of his decisions.

Refuges are used by women and children in their hour of need, when they are at their most vulnerable; indeed, if we cannot support those women and children, they may be trapped in violent and destructive relationships. I strongly urge the Government to reconsider their approach, and offer full protection for women and children by ensuring that supported accommodation, including refuges, is fully exempt from the housing benefit cap.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Thanks to the discipline shown by hon. Members, we can have an extra minute or so for each speech. Sorry about going back and forth, but I want to get everybody in.

10.11 am

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I sincerely thank my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) for securing this urgent and necessary debate.

The scale of relationship violence in the UK today is truly shocking. It is to all of our shame that violence against women and girls is still at endemic levels, but it is to this Government’s shame that, despite their promises to protect women and girls, the very lifelines that many women rely on for safety and protection are disappearing from the map. A toxic combination of local authority cuts, the cap on housing benefit and the impact of local authority commissioning processes is creating a fragile and unsustainable women’s sector.

The consequences of Government policies and inaction are stark. In 2014, almost a third of the women trying to access domestic violence services were turned away due to lack of space. One of my key concerns is about access to specialist provision, where the problem is even more acute. The damage already done to specialist services—those that support black and minority ethnic women, Jewish women or the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community—is chilling. In the past 12 years, Imkaan, an organisation representing dedicated BME women’s services, has estimated that 15 BME specialist services have closed. Now there are only 34 BME women’s organisations that offer services to victims of violence. Between April 2014 and March 2015, 17 of Imkaan’s
member organisations supported more than 21,000 women, and yet Imkaan says that 67% of its members face an uncertain future.

For Latin American Women’s Aid, the only refuge of its kind in the UK, the situation is equally precarious. Between 2001 and 2011, the Latin American population in the UK grew fourfold and yet this organisation has lost its contract with Islington Council, which claimed that the service it provides was not necessary. In the short term, Latin American Women’s Aid is keeping afloat through emergency funding supplied by the Department for Communities and Local Government, and I thank the Minister for that.

In my own constituency of Rotherham, Apna Haq, which has provided refuge and support for women and girls of Asian descent since 1994, lost its contract and funding from the council, and it is now fighting to survive.

Such dedicated services are vital for women. They are experts in their provision, designed and delivered by, and for, the users and communities they serve. This enables them to innovate rapidly to meet women’s changing needs, for example recognising new forms of abuse, such as revenge porn and online harassment, long before the authorities do.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): There are still a wide range of services to support women and a wide range of laws to protect women. However, does the hon. Lady agree that we still need to do much more on prevention of violence and on reducing the ongoing scepticism that women are met with when they report violence?

Sarah Champion: The hon. Member is absolutely right and I wish, with every bone in my body, that this Government would focus on prevention of all forms of violence and abuse, because all we are doing currently is dealing with the horrific outcomes of violence and abuse, rather than tackling them at source.

These specialist organisations are community-led. The women who seek shelter see themselves reflected in the staffing and the management of the services. Consequently, these organisations understand the dynamics of the abuse faced by the women in those communities and can tailor their services accordingly. As a result—and this is vital—specialist services are trusted by the women who use them. Their presence is known in the community, meaning that women will self-refer, enabling those women to leave a violent relationship because they know that support exists.

However, despite their necessary place in the sector, specialist services are at a distinct disadvantage to mainstream housing providers and women’s organisations when it comes to commissioning. The application of a free market approach is not working, because—as a result of the tailored support that they provide within a specific community—specialist providers simply cannot compete with mainstream providers on cost. Existing commissioning criteria value cost per bed, not quality, trust or the ability to generate self-referrals. This approach is to the detriment of the sector, and ultimately to women’s lives.

Will the Minister listen to the providers of those services when they tell him that the current system is failing BME women? Will he instruct local commissioners to alter their commissioning criteria when awarding contracts, to emphasise the quality of provision? Will he ensure that local commissioning criteria include evidence of an organisation’s track record, the ability to generate self-referrals, and the ability to innovate and tailor services to women’s needs? Will he recommend to local commissioners that they do not always need to retain specialist support services?

If the Minister does not address the current instability in funding, he needs to recognise the dire consequences for existing specialist services. Currently, providers cannot guarantee security of employment for their staff for more than six months, and consequently they lose the very experts who are trusted by women seeking help. Instability of funding forces refuges to compete with other women’s services, rather than working in partnership with such services for the benefit of the women they all serve. One-size-fits-all provision simply does not work for this country’s most vulnerable people.

Will the Minister hear the call from specialist organisations for a single, national, ring-fenced budget for specialist BME women’s and girls’ services? Such a fund would guarantee that these services continue, and are led by and for the communities they serve. There is already a precedent for this, in the form of women’s violence services that are supported through the nationally administered rape support fund.

Finally, the Government’s ending violence against women and girls strategy, published in March 2016, mentions a 2015 review carried out by DCLG of domestic abuse services. The review indicated the increased pressures that specialist services are facing and the lack of provision for victims with the most complex needs. Can the Minister please make a commitment to publish that report?
not telling them, because domestic violence is very difficult to talk about. That is why these services are absolutely critical and why it pains me that, on one day in 2014, 112 women and their 84 children were turned away from refuges because there were not enough spaces for them. When two women a week are killed by a partner or former partner, we are talking about a crisis and one that, frankly, is only getting worse.

I want to raise the capping of housing benefit to the rate of the local housing allowance in the social sector, because it is having a crushing effect on the funding for our women’s refuges. The money from housing benefit is the secure funding that the refuges know they can receive and rely on in a very insecure world. The capping policy will have an impact on refuges, which use the housing benefit claimed by their clients to cover their rent and service costs, because delivering women’s refuge services is not cheap.

These are specialist services. The independent domestic violence advisers will support a woman and her children to come out of domestic violence and to rebuild their lives, a point that other speakers have highlighted. In response to written questions, Ministers have confirmed that they do not have basic information about the number of people in supported housing claiming housing benefit. We need to find that out, because the impact of the Government’s decisions is crushing the support offered by women’s refuges.

I am disappointed that the hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) is not in his place, because he has been talking quite a bit in the press about women’s refuges in my county of Lancashire. I would like to tell him that no council, whatever its political colour, would choose to cut support for women fleeing violence. All parties know that women need these services. I honestly believe that all councils, whatever their colour, want to deliver these services, but we are seeing huge cuts. In Lancashire, we are expected to make another £62 million of savings over the next four years. These services are not statutory, and we have to deliver the statutory services, so there comes a point where women’s refuges are taking the hit. One third of all local authority-funded domestic violence services had been cut by 2012.

Given that the last women’s refuge in Cumbria closed its doors in March and 46 women have already died this year, we know that we need to be doing far more to support women’s refuges. We need more women’s refuges, not fewer. I implore the Minister to look again, particularly at the housing benefit changes, and to exempt refuges. I want briefly to raise the work of Southall Black Sisters, which is outside my constituency boundary. It has been involved in many landmark cases that have changed the law. A well known example is that of Kiranjit Ahluwalia, whose conviction for murdering her husband in 1989 after 10 years of sustained abuse was eventually quashed in 1992. It was a case of diminished responsibility; it was retried and led to a film with the Bollywood actress Aishwarya Rai called “Provoked”—the case hinged on provocation.

As has been said, the point about geography—when people are told, “You’re in the wrong borough; you can’t access these services”—is already stymying these services. Southall Black Sisters goes further than it says on the tin: it has helped people outside the borough of Ealing—the case I have referred to was from Crawley in Sussex.

Another, similar case that Southall Black Sisters took on was that of Zoora Shah, who originally came from Bradford. She poisoned her husband while under enormous duress—depression and sustained domestic violence to her and her kid for many years. I am a member of the Select Committee on Justice, so I know that individuals find the legal system difficult, costly, protracted and adversarial. Legal aid is becoming scarcer and scarcer, so the support services that come with the refuges are absolutely vital in this day and age.

The caps on housing benefit, cutting rents in social housing—all these things are having a cumulative effect. In my constituency, we have a YMCA foyer, which my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) and I opened with great fanfare. It will have to close its doors because it is not getting the rising rents that its whole business plan is based on. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) put it very well when she talked about the cumulative effect of all these crazy policies that pick on the most vulnerable in society. It is ill-advised, costly, crude and nothing short of cruel.

These services are now condemned to closure. Only the month before last, we celebrated International Women’s Day in this place. The Minister needs to reverse the cuts to allow women to live with dignity. That is all we are asking. How can any Government allow such a state of affairs to continue, relentlessly pursuing these swingeing cuts that are decimating support services for women suffering domestic violence? Opposition Members have
made the case for ring-fencing and statutory obligations so that funding is protected. We also need the abolition of “no recourse to public funds”, whereby, someone’s legal status means they are not allowed to access services. That straitjacket should not apply. It is a moral case, if nothing else.

We have seen U-turns on a range of Government policies. Just in the last week—on the day I asked a question about it at International Development questions—a U-turn on child refugees was announced. We had a debate about education in London, and everyone was talking about the idiocy of the forced academisation programme; two days later, that had gone. Let us hope that history repeats itself. The Minister is a reasonable man, and he must listen. This issue must be next on the list.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): We are doing well on time, all of a sudden. We have more than 30 minutes. If the Opposition Spokespeople can keep within 10 minutes, there will be more time for interventions on the Minister—we want democratic accountability—and perhaps for Julie Cooper to wind up.

10.27 am

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): If that was not an incentive to speed up and allow the Minister plenty of time, I do not know what is. First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) on securing the debate, which gives us a chance to discuss something that we have discussed many times in the Chamber, but we have not yet got to the nub of the issue.

First, I thank Women’s Aid and Scottish Women’s Aid for providing the briefings that have supported the valuable contributions and experience of many of the Members who have spoken today. The fact is that while there are on occasion men who suffer from domestic violence, the majority of the vulnerable individuals who access these services are women and children.

At the most vulnerable time in her life, no woman would choose to go a refuge, leaving her home with no belongings to go into a situation that was unfamiliar and completely alien for her and her children. It is not a desirable situation or outcome, and it needs vital funding. I echo the sentiments of the hon. Lady. She made a heartfelt contribution and made serious comments about the risks of the lack of funding. Ultimately, that will result in the degradation of these services’ ability to truly meet the needs and requirements of these vulnerable individuals.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) always makes the most powerful contributions on these matters, and I would not expect any less from her. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) contributed valid points about how the issue affects all women. Asylum seekers are victims too. Irrespective of nationality, women need support. I hope the Minister will seriously consider that.

The one point I want to make in this debate—it is the only one that really needs to be made—is about the exemption for local authority housing and the impact it could have on the ability to provide services. Refuges are an important space to assist women escaping terrible, violent situations. There is no way to put into words the experiences of these women. The services they will receive at the front door from that staff member are all down to the necessary funding, whatever the mechanism is. Refuges provide a safety net for women escaping physical and sexual violence, and we must ensure that the Tories’ austerity measures do not destroy those vital support systems.

Cuts to vital services leave people in crisis. Having left everything behind, women are under more strain than ever before—more than we can ever imagine. Ultimately, it is the staff who receive the women who have to worry about the funding shortfalls and making their own ends meet at the end of the month. That is another point I want to raise: the real cost is not only to the victims of violence, but to the staff who deliver the services. The women and men who provide the services also have livelihoods, families and children and they also have to put food on the table. The Government’s constant cuts mean that many of the people delivering such vital services will never be able to fully meet their own needs because of funding ambitions and meeting one funding aim to another. Housing benefit provides them with that vital staple that allows them to deliver those services.

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): The hon. Lady is making a valuable point about the uncertainty for staff. That is something we really have to consider, because the levels of stress on staff members who work in these vital services cannot be overestimated. The lottery of funding and the stress of having to put in funding application after funding application to shrinking pots has to be taken into serious consideration.

Angela Crawley: Absolutely. I know at first hand that many of the women who work in these services—it is predominantly women who work in such services—are the ones who struggle to make ends meet and put food on the table, as well as to support the women who need their vital support. If the Government intend to continue to cut, cut, cut, at what point will they focus on the big-picture politics and look at where those cuts are starting to take away from other budgets in other places? Local authorities—local government in Scotland is devolved—need funding to support services.

In Scotland, we have invested an additional £11.8 million as part of the SNP Government’s equality budget for 2015-16, with £2.4 million of that budget allocated to ensure that court cases involving domestic violence are seen to and £1.85 million awarded to Rape Crisis Scotland over three years to allow it to expand its advocacy services across the country. The Scottish Government are committed to addressing such concerns.

Various points have been made about the increase in reporting, which are valid points. Reporting is essential and an increase is always to be encouraged. However, the process of justice and the process of getting to that point is so far removed from the reality that still too many women will remain in homes, in unsafe situations, because the funding is not there. If the funding is not there, the services cannot do outreach and make sure that those women can leave their terrible situations.

I am proud of the work done by my colleagues in Edinburgh. The hard work done by Women’s Aid and other organisations across the UK is a vital support that is needed in crisis. The Government must surely
listen to the calls from every Member who has spoken today. I call on the Minister to seriously consider making refuges exempt from the housing benefit caps. I join colleagues in calling for the much needed funding to protect services across local authorities and for the Minister to commit to funding domestic violence services at all costs.

10.33 am

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. You have presided over a disciplined debate with a clear purpose: to question the effectiveness of the policies that the Government are pursuing and to alert the Minister to what I hope are the unintended consequences of the policies as we all understand them.

I begin by paying tribute to all those who work or have worked in refuges for their incredible work under extremely challenging circumstances. Their work is literally a lifeline. I also want to speak to every woman who may be listening to this debate who is at risk of violence or abuse. I offer them our solidarity and assure them that they are at the forefront of our minds today and all days.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) on securing the debate. She gave us a timely reminder of the history of women's refuges. My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) spoke about specialist domestic violence services, especially BME services. The issues we are considering today are incredibly important, and the debate speaks to why I and many other Members in the room are in politics. We came into politics to stand up for the people who need our support and to help women, children and the vulnerable when they go through some of the most difficult challenges that any of us could imagine. We are in politics to give voice to the voiceless.

All women facing violence should have a place to go. If the Government's changes go forward, they will be faced with having no place to go. They will need refuge and there will be no refuge. How we support women when they need refuge—when they are escaping violence and abuse and trying to help themselves and their children—tells us a lot about the sort of society we are and the sort of Government we have. The Prime Minister has set a similar test for society. He said before the election that a good society looks after its vulnerable members, but the Government's crude cuts to housing benefit mean they are on course to fail their own test. Vulnerable women, children and men will have no place to go; they will not be looked after.

Academics at the University of Lancaster have produced research arguing:

“Substantial reductions in national budgets are leading to cuts in local services to prevent and protect against gender-based violence against women and girls.”

Although the services to protect women from violence are provided at local level, the budgets to fund services and the nature of the commissioning processes are largely set at national level. No cuts should be carried out that lead to a loss of vital housing support, such as temporary refuges.

We have heard today about the statistics, but behind each statistic—each cold number—are lives destroyed, futures destroyed, and sometimes deaths. We have heard how families in every constituency are affected. We have heard stories from Heywood and Middleton, Ealing, Lancaster and Bristol West, and from across Scotland and Northern Ireland. I thank the two male Members here today, the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), because these debates are often dominated by females, which they should not be.

Although the Government have done some very positive things, they are in danger of failing; the money they have put in will be worthless if the refuges are not there for people to go to. One of the key aspects of any policy on protecting women must be the proper funding of refuge shelters so that they are available for any woman going through an acute crisis.

Violence against women and girls is never acceptable—we all know that—but in Britain today it is far too common. We have heard harrowing details during today’s debate that reinforce the need to fight to keep refuges open. We heard testimony—as powerful as ever—from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), and we heard that the Government’s housing benefit cap will have a significant harmful effect on supported housing and women’s refuges. In the 2015 spending review, the Government announced that housing benefit would be capped at the local housing allowance rate in the social sector. The majority of supported housing tenants depend on housing benefit to cover the cost of their housing, and the application of that cap would have a significant impact on the most vulnerable residents in our communities.

The policy will have an impact on refuges, which use housing benefit claimed by their clients to cover their rental and services. The effects of the change will be stark. The cap could see refuges losing much of their income each week and raises the question of whether they will remain viable and open on an ongoing basis.

The Government recently announced a 12-month delay in their proposal to bring supported housing rents in line with local housing allowance, meaning that new tenancies from 2017 will be affected from 2018. I believe the delay has come about because the Government have realised that there is a problem. The cut in housing benefit must be halted at least until the full facts are known. Ministers have admitted that those facts are unknown at the moment. Specialist housing for vulnerable tenants is generally more expensive to run because of its tenants’ support needs, so higher rents are charged, which are often met by housing benefit. The Government have made no exception for this type of accommodation in their plans to cut housing benefit support for social tenants.

In answer to a question on women’s refuges asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), the Minister said that the Government are “committed to making sure that no victim of domestic abuse is turned away from the support they need.”—[Official Report, 15 October 2015; Vol. 600, c. 487.]

However, that does not correlate with what Women’s Aid is reporting. It says that nearly a third of all referrals to refuges are being declined because of lack of space. No woman should be turned away at the point of
need, and no child should have to go back to an abusive parent, but it is happening. A third of all referrals are being declined.

In the summer 2015 Budget, the Government announced a £3.2 million fund to boost the provision of services for victims of domestic violence, including refuges. Of course we welcomed that, but it is not enough. By implication, the new fund suggests that the Government understand the importance of refuges, but as Women’s Aid points out, that money will cover only short-run costs, when what is needed is long-term national funding to guarantee security. The Government’s new strategy for stopping violence against women could fail because of cuts.

There is an important role for the commissioning process in domestic violence services. Local commissioners should be instructed to ensure that they are taking the right commissioning decisions for women. In an area as sensitive as domestic violence services, a premium must be allowed for ensuring high-quality services. The women and children involved require nothing less. This debate is an opportunity to scrutinise current policy. I urge the Government to think again and roll back the changes that have already been made and suspend any others in the pipeline. Capping housing benefit in the social sector at the relevant local housing allowance will put women at risk of domestic violence at risk. Women are most at risk when they try to leave. At that point, the danger could be fatal.

The Government should carry out a full impact assessment—I believe they have not yet done so—of the effects of the proposed changes, and of any other options they consider. They must consult charities, housing associations, local authorities and the women who know. Organisations know their clients and the effects that the benefit cuts will have. The consultation should set out the knock-on costs for refuges, and Ministers should set out the arrangements that are in place and their arguments in support of their measures, because we have not heard why they introducing them. We have seen neither the impact assessment nor the evidence. The cut in housing benefit must be halted, at least until the full facts are known. Will the Minister do that to help protect some of the most vulnerable members of our society?

I have a few questions for the Minister. In a fairly recent debate on cuts to local housing allowance, I asked the Minister for Housing and Planning, the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), several questions to which he could not respond at the time. I have since written to him; will the Minister remind him of the points I made as I asked earlier and make representations to the Home Office and the Home Secretary that they look at changing the anomaly of women who are excluded because of their insecure immigration status? I do not think the Home Secretary intended that.

Mr Jones: I can now cross the hon. Lady off my list. Members to whom I shall refer later in my speech. Yes, I will do as she requested and raise that point with the Home Office.

Although it is for local areas to make decisions on support for women who are experiencing abuse, we want to work with local commissioners of services to deliver a secure future for refuges. We know that local partnerships are working hard to deliver vital services, and I commend the work done by people in refuges up and down the country. The best areas have convened excellent partnerships to inform local service delivery. They have clear strategies and pooled budgets to get the most for their money.

We want to bring all areas in the country up to the level of the best, which is why we will publish a national statement of expectations on the provision of services to tackle violence against women and girls. We are going to provide support for commissioners and funding to help local areas to achieve those expectations. The national statement of expectations will set a framework for effective local commissioning, reinforcing the need to bring local service providers together, plan on the basis of local need, and be clear about accountability for service delivery.

Mrs Helen Grant: I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister knows that, tragically, one in four girls—some as young as 14—are hit by their boyfriends. In addition...
to all the other good work that the Government are doing, does he agree that that we need to talk to girls much more about respecting themselves and others, and about gender equality and empowerment?

Mr Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and absolutely agree with her. One hears about many situations in which, unfortunately, young girls are exploited by young males and peer pressure is put on them. We should be absolutely resolute in our opposition to that and about informing young girls that they should absolutely be able to say no without fear. My hon. Friend makes a really important point.

Sarah Champion: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Jones: I will in just a second.

Sarah Champion: Just on that exact point.

Mr Jones: Yes, okay, I am persuaded.

Sarah Champion: The Minister is very kind. I just want to add something that I think he really wanted to say: it is also about making sure that every boy grows up knowing about respect, consent and empathy. It is not just a girl issue, and I know the Minister wanted to say that.

Mr Jones: I completely agree. The hon. Lady and I might not agree on lots of things in this House, but we fully agree on that issue. It is not just the responsibility of girls to know when they should say no; it is absolutely the responsibility of young males to respect girls and use that respect in a dignified way so they do not put young girls under pressure to do things that they do not want to do.

Angela Crawley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Jones: I will give way once more on that point.

Angela Crawley: I thank the Minister for giving way, given that my speaking time was so reduced. The point about female empowerment and the importance of educating young girls and teaching young boys about respecting women and girls is well made. To come back to the point of the debate—I am sure the Minister is going to do so—what are the Government planning to do to make these refuges exempt from the reduction in housing benefit and to ensure that they can remain open? I just want to keep the debate on track.

Mr Jones: I assure the hon. Lady that I anticipated that that issue might come up. It is already written in my speech, and I will explain the Government’s position in a few moments.

As I was saying, planning for local need must take account of the needs of all women in our local communities, including those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, those from isolated communities and those with complex needs. It should also take account of the need for women and children to move from one area to another to build safe and independent lives. That point has been made by a number of hon. Members. It is absolutely wrong that services are not provided for women who need to move from one area to another when they seek refuge and safe haven from the situation they are in.

Although that approach needs time to work, we must act if it does not deliver a transformation in service provision, so we will review what we are doing after two years. We are developing the national statement with service providers and commissioners to ensure that it reflects their significant expertise. To answer the hon. Member for Burnley, we hope to publish it very soon.

We understand that meeting the expectations that we are setting will be very challenging, so it is vital that local areas are funded to meet those standards and to provide the critical bedrock of specialist accommodation-based support. We will launch a two-year fund to help local areas put in place the reforms needed to meet the national statement and to support the provision of accommodation-based services. We secured £40 million in the spending review to support victims of domestic abuse. That builds on the £10 million of funding for strengthening the provision of safe accommodation in the previous spending review period and the £3.5 million fund to support the provision of domestic violence services in 2015.

We invited bids for that funding. There was interest from across the country, and 46 successful bids were announced in December 2015. We hope that there will be a similar degree of interest in the upcoming funding. To answer the question asked by the hon. Member for Burnley, we hope to open that fund very, very soon.

Jess Phillips: Is the Minister aware that the funds he is talking about, which were allocated in December 2015, had to be spent by March 2016? As always with these rounds of 10 million quid here and 10 million quid there, there is no eye on the future. It is short-termist, and if anything it provides work, not help, for women’s refuges.

Mr Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I know from her speech that she has significant experience of this area. To give her a bit more assurance, the funding that we are putting out is to cover a two-year period, which gives more time in the way that she mentioned.

I want to talk about a subject that many hon. Members mentioned—the future of refuges and the supported housing sector. My Department and the Department for Work and Pensions commissioned a major evidence review of supported housing to give a better picture of its scope, scale and cost. It will report shortly, and we will continue to work with and listen to providers to develop a long-term, sustainable funding regime for this sector.

Teresa Pearce: Will the Minister expand on what “shortly” means? Is it like when the Whips say, “Vote shortly”? When the Government say “shortly”, it can sometimes mean quite a long time. Is it weeks or months? What is it?

Mr Jones: We all do what the Whips tell us when they say “shortly”. I will have to leave the hon. Lady with the word “shortly”, but I assure her that we take this issue very seriously and that we will come forward with a long-term, sustainable funding regime. We have been
absolutely clear that we want the most vulnerable to be supported through the welfare reforms, so we are deferring the application of the local housing allowance cap to supported housing for an additional year so we have more time to get this right.

At the start of my speech, I said that we want to make ending violence against women and girls everyone’s business. The Government have to lead by example. The Department for Communities and Local Government is working with the Home Office, the Department of Health, the Cabinet Office and the Treasury to ensure that no woman is turned away from the help that she needs. The point that the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) made is very important. We are certainly looking at that across the relevant Departments to ensure that no woman in the position that she mentioned is turned away.

We rely on the knowledge, the expertise and the critical friendship of many organisations. We are talking to the providers of refuges and services for the survivors of domestic abuse as we develop our policy. We are also talking to the Local Government Association and local authorities to understand how we can support their work. I sincerely hope that together we can all seize the opportunity to make a real difference to the lives of women living in fear of abuse.

Jess Phillips Will the Minister give way?

Mr Jones: That is the end of my speech.

Jess Phillips He successfully did not mention housing benefit once.

Mr Jones: I did.

10.57 am

Julie Cooper: I am grateful to all Members who took part in this powerful debate on a truly shocking subject. I hope the Minister and the Government are as shocked by the issues as we all are, and I hope we can focus on the facts. The Minister talked about the national statement of expectation, which I welcome, but I hope that the expectation is that all women in this country—and I mean all women—who need access to a refuge will know that they have that access.

Let me remind the Minister of the Government’s record to date: 17% of refuges have closed since they came to office as a direct result of Government policies such as cuts to local authority funding and changes to housing benefit. I hope the Minister will cease to think that short-term funding pots are the answer. To ensure that women are safe and to give them the resources they need, we need long-term, sustainable funding. If he were only to reverse the changes to local authority funding and council tax and make statutory funding of women’s refuges a requirement in all authorities, that would be significant progress.

As I said at the beginning, this is not a new problem but an age-old problem, and I hope the Government have the courage to make it a problem of the past. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) said, they must not keep clobbering the most vulnerable of women.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered Domestic Violence Refuges.
Organised Sporting Events: Charges

11 am

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered powers of local government to charge for organised sporting events.

I have called the debate mainly to highlight an ongoing dispute between Stoke Gifford parish council in my constituency and Parkrun Ltd. It has now developed into a much bigger issue to do with the freedom, authority and ability of directly elected local councils to charge for organised sporting events in their parks and recreational areas. The other question is what actually constitutes an organised sporting event.

The dispute has led to the intervention of the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, who threatened—in a letter to the chairman of the parish council, Councillor Ernie Brown, who is present in the Public Gallery—to consider the use of legislation to stop Stoke Gifford parish council charging for organised sporting events in its park. In the autumn, I was contacted by a small number of local residents, and I passed their concerns on to the parish council, mindful of the fact that, ultimately, this is a matter for directly elected parish councillors.

I want to say that, obviously, I fully support and understand the aims of Parkrun Ltd as an admirable organisation for getting people to do exercise. The fact that a small, local community idea, which started in Teddington, now provides organised runs every weekend in 850 locations and 12 countries throughout the world is fantastic. I understand that UK Parkrun Ltd attracts a large number of runners, with some 395 events every Saturday and Sunday. That is clearly great.

Let me set the scene. Little Stoke park is used regularly by about 3,000 people for organised sporting events, including 12 regular football teams, 12 occasional football teams, four rugby teams, tag rugby league and Australian rules football, and it provides a 3G all-weather football pitch. Little Stoke park has a significant number of other, diverse user groups, amounting to about 1,000 people, who access the existing community hall facilities on a regular basis, and the venue also accommodates occasional bookings, which include the likes of children’s birthday parties and other one-off events. The general public have access to a range of other facilities on the site, including a BMX track, a Jurassic park and a children’s play area.

In recent years, the average income generated from pitch and hall hire at Little Stoke park has been approximately £35,000 per year. Over that time, there has been considerable investment in the site’s large car park, of £55,000; in parks machinery, of £90,000; and in a large section of path, which has been converted into a pedestrian and cycle route and incorporates solar lighting in the ground to enhance the safety of park users. Furthermore, the construction costs of a 4 metre-wide path on one side of the park were £140,000, while the 3G pitch was also enhanced at a cost of £52,000 during the same period. That all shows me that we are talking about a sensible and responsible parish council, which is making sure that its park is well managed, with good outdoor facilities that can continue to be used well into the future.

In the past three years, the parish council has welcomed Parkrun, but weekend runs organised by it had begun to dominate the park, with up to 300 runners arriving every weekend. The park is just over 30 acres and has 120 car parking spaces for visitors, but all the parking spaces are filled by the Parkrun runners on Saturday and Sunday mornings.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): I hear what my hon. Friend has to say, but does he also agree that sport and, in particular, Parkrun have a really important role to play in bringing people from different backgrounds together, and bringing communities and women together—a lot of women enjoy a park run, with the camaraderie of other women? Obviously, there are cost issues, but does he not think that such activities should be encouraged, rather than discouraged?

Jack Lopresti: I am not, of course, seeking to discourage any such activities. As I said in my opening remarks, I appreciate fully what Parkrun does and is trying to achieve, and the benefits of that. The debate is about the ability of a local council to raise money for the maintenance of its facilities, and about what constitutes an organised sporting event, which I will come to later in my remarks.

The parish council is not seeking a large amount from Parkrun Ltd—a contribution that would have equated to less than a pound a runner, put towards the maintenance and possible future enhancement of the facilities. The chairman of the parish council, Ernie Brown, even offered to apply for a grant for Parkrun—all Parkrun had to do was to ask him officially, but it has not done so. The parish council has also made it clear that the dispute is not about charging individual runners—just as it would not charge individuals who go for walks, or runs—but only about charging for regular organised events.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I am one of the vice-presidents of the Local Government Association, and I chair the all-party group on local democracy. That is on behalf of the National Association of Local Councils, which represents 7,000 town and parish councils. I can understand what my hon. Friend’s parish council is going through. The Government talk about devolution and more local powers, so I am shocked that we have to have this debate, to be honest, especially as the council had gone to so much trouble even to get Parkrun involved and to help it apply for grants. How can we talk about devolving powers more locally, only for the Government to stick their nose in? How can that be right?

Jack Lopresti: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. What we are talking about flies completely in the face of localism and the devolution agenda; a sledgehammer is being used to crack a nut, on an issue that should not be a matter for the Secretary of State or any national Department—this is a local matter.

The point is, with up to 300 people turning up every Saturday and Sunday, and stewards organising and timing the runs, the council could charge at least the cost of one. I run regularly in the Bristol half-marathon and the Bradley Stoke 10 km, both of which it is worth noting that I pay for—I accept that, because they are organised...
The Secretary of State mentioned in a letter that, under section 151 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989, he has general powers to make regulations to amend or revoke any pre-existing powers for the local authority to charge. However, having looked into that with the House of Commons Library, I see that section 152 of the 1989 Act, which defines the relevant authorities that section 151 refers to, does not include parish councils, which suggests that the Secretary of State cannot do that. Recent legislation that the Secretary of State and I voted on in the Localism Act 2011 allows local authorities the power of competence “to do anything that individuals generally may do.”

Under that power, section 3 of the Act has provisions regarding charging, which, as far as I can see, the parish council meets.

None of that has been tested in a court of law, and hopefully the Secretary of State would not like to embark on an expensive legal battle with a small parish council. Stoke Gifford parish council’s decision to charge Parkrun for the use of its local park is not a matter for central Government and that should remain the case. The truth of the matter is that Parkrun Ltd, however admirable, has become a victim of its own success: it has now reached a size that overwhelms local facilities, so—like other sporting organisations—it needs to make a contribution to the facilities it uses. I do not want to discourage runners—being one myself, I fully appreciate the benefits of keeping fit—but Parkrun Ltd is no longer a small voluntary group; it is an organisation with nearly a million users registered on its website.

I am sure the Secretary of State agrees that we want people to be realistic about the actual cost of running local services and we want to promote the localism agenda by giving local representatives the power to run their facilities on behalf of local people as they deem fit. The Government have stated their commitment to devolving greater powers to local authorities, but an exception seems to be made when the local parish council does something that the Secretary of State does not agree with.

11.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) for providing us with the opportunity to have this important debate. The debate is useful and timely: as the days grow longer and we get warmer weather—over the weekend we thought we were going to get some, but that seems to have changed—more and more people will be using their local parks and green spaces for organised or spontaneous events as groups or as individuals. Local parks are, of course, community assets and it is important that local authorities, as the stewards of those assets, maintain them for communities to use. We have a long tradition of free use of public parks, but—as I shall shortly set out—it is appropriate that, in the right circumstances, local authorities are able to charge for the use of specific facilities in those public parks.

We should acknowledge the importance of our public parks and green spaces. They are places where one can exercise, relax and enjoy being part of a community or find peace and solitude in a busy world. They are also

sporting events. This year, I know that the Bristol half costs £38, because I entered it in the past few days. Moreover, when my daughter, Sophie, as a teenager, played football for Stoke Lane Ladies at that very park, all the players had to pay £2.50 per game per week, to contribute to the maintenance of the park and its facilities. She has now gone to play rugby in America, while she is studying at university, which I am hugely proud of.

The fact that Parkrun refuses to make a contribution, on principle, to the park for its events means that other local groups and organisations are beginning to question why they have to make a contribution, when Parkrun clearly does not. It is important to note that Parkrun in the UK is a limited company, and not a registered charity. Parkrun only publishes abbreviated accounts, so we cannot see whether it pays its directors or any staff—I have heard it does, but I cannot confirm that. Perhaps the Minister can help us with that in his remarks.

Parkrun has numerous sponsors and supporters for which the full sponsorship details—how much and in return for what—are also not noted in the accounts. Sponsors listed on the website include Fitbit, Intersport, Alzheimer’s Research UK and VitalityHealth. The supporters listed include the London Marathon, the mobile phone company Three, and Muckle LLP, a law firm.

People have made the point that Parkrun Ltd events are organised by local volunteers. That is great, but we must never forget that Stoke Gifford parish council are volunteers who work tirelessly for their local community, as do other volunteers who run many other organised sporting events in the park and make a financial contribution to its upkeep. Incidentally, Parkrun’s website has a shop link on it from which sales are made on behalf of Wiggle Ltd.

I am not against Parkrun making profit and paying staff. I do, however, object to the argument that it should have the right to use Little Stoke park for free for organised events that dominate the park when all other local organisations have to pay to do so. The pressure that some of the Parkrun lobby have put on our democratically elected parish councillors has been appalling: they have received an influx of aggressive emails from non-constituents, 50 freedom of information requests and letters with threats of changes to the law from the Secretary of State. Parkrun has also threatened a judicial review, which would be massively expensive from the Secretary of State.

Parkrun has now reached a size that overwhelms local facilities, so—like other sporting organisations—it needs to make a contribution to the facilities it uses. I do not want to discourage runners—being one myself, I fully appreciate the benefits of keeping fit—but Parkrun Ltd is no longer a small voluntary group; it is an organisation with nearly a million users registered on its website.

I am sure the Secretary of State agrees that we want people to be realistic about the actual cost of running local services and we want to promote the localism agenda by giving local representatives the power to run their facilities on behalf of local people as they deem fit. The Government have stated their commitment to devolving greater powers to local authorities, but an exception seems to be made when the local parish council does something that the Secretary of State does not agree with.
places of ever-changing beauty, where the march of the seasons is marked by growth, bloom and falling leaves. Our parks and green spaces are certainly good for the soul and good for the body.

This is an Olympic year and, with our elite athletes heading to Rio for the Olympics and Paralympics in August and September, we should not be surprised if, inspired by what I am sure will be the golden glories of Team GB, young people—and those who perhaps are not so young—are inspired to demonstrate their own athletic abilities. The place many will head to for that is their local park.

The local park is a natural venue for exercise and sport and it always has been. For generations, our parks have played host to countless local sporting triumphs as they are transformed, for a short time, from parkland to hallowed turf. Our parks and green spaces are therefore not just vital community assets but special places where, for many, memories are made. I freely acknowledge that proper maintenance of those community assets rightly requires investment and financial commitment from local authorities.

There is no problem with local authorities using parks to raise revenue. They legitimately charge for a variety of events and specific activities that take place in their local parks.

Jack Lopresti: May I be clear that Stoke Gifford parish council is not looking specifically to raise revenue from Parkrun Ltd? It is looking for a contribution to maintain existing facilities—it is not a profit-making exercise.

Mr Jones: I will come on to what we believe it is or is not reasonable for people to pay for. I understand my hon. Friend’s point that the parish council, in anything it charges for, may simply be looking to cover maintenance costs and so on rather than to raise revenue to put into the coffers for revenue’s sake.

It is appropriate for the public to pay a reasonable sum for the exclusive use of a facility such as a tennis court or a football pitch or for shared use of a facility such as a golf course. It is also appropriate for charges to be made for special or seasonal events such as outdoor concerts or other ticketed events that generate a profit for the local authority or the event organiser.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): The argument on both sides is interesting, and I too declare an interest as a runner; I am going to the sixth Eastleigh Parkrun on Saturday morning. I am concerned because we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) about male-dominated sports tending to involve subscriptions being paid for general use, and an understanding that there is wear and tear. However, for half an hour once a week, with no clear wear and tear issues, I would be concerned. We have an obesity crisis in my constituency and problems of diabetes and amputations. Parks are for people and people make parks. I want there to be clarity about whether, if we start making charges for such significant runs, which happen across the country, we will set a dangerous precedent. Things are working very well in other parish councils.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend has declared an interest; I will do so too. She will probably guess that I am not a park runner; nor do I run on a regular basis.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): You are declaring a disinterest.

Mr Jones: Thank you, Mr Davies. I am not necessarily disinterested, but that is not an interest that I pursue at this point.

We have no issue with local authorities charging for the use of facilities when it is legitimate to do so. Indeed, it was the Conservative-led coalition Government who legislated to give local authorities the general power of competence enabling them, among other things, to charge for the use of specific facilities where they considered they could not rely upon other legislation in doing so. As with all local authority decisions, the decision to charge for the use of a specific facility should be both transparent and accountable. Local authorities are, of course, ultimately accountable to their electorate, who can exercise the ultimate sanction at the ballot box. Indeed, earlier this month millions were doing just that as they voted in local elections. Where a local authority decides to make a charge it should, of course, be clear about what it is charging for, how much it is charging, and under what power it is making the charge. Otherwise, how are those affected by the charge to know that it is fair, legal and proportionate?

There must also be accountability. Those affected by the decisions of democratically elected local authorities of course have the right to object to them. Otherwise power would be exercised without responsibility or consequence, although, in response to what my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke said on the matter, I would always encourage communities to lobby councillors in a respectful and dignified manner, and not in a way that none of us would find acceptable and appropriate.

Parkrun is a network of local runners, and Parkruns are free, weekly 5 km runs in local parks. The runs take place every Saturday morning and are free to participate in, and the local organisation is done by local volunteers. My hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke mentioned profits, and my understanding is that Parkrun is a not-for-profit company that relies on donations and sponsorship. It is not an organisation that relies on membership, or on subscription or registration fees. I understand that the events are run by volunteers, and are set up not to make a profit for anyone but merely as a vehicle for people to come together as my hon. Friends have described, for a morning run on a Saturday.

Mrs Helen Grant: On that point about coming together, does the Minister agree that there is still a worrying gender gap—of about 2 million—between the number of women and men doing sport? Parkrun and other schemes, ideas and activities like it make an important contribution to trying to close that gap, and that should be encouraged and acknowledged.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend has immense knowledge of the subject and did an excellent job as Sports Minister. I agree with her, because many males take part in organised sporting activity such as football; but often once girls reach adulthood they do not take part in
organised sports. Some do, but the majority do not. Therefore I strongly agree with what my hon. Friend said about Parkrun, if it means women feel able to come together and exercise in a safe environment because they are in a group of other women who support them. It is an excellent example of communities organising events on a voluntary basis. It is a great use of parks, and, as has been said, it enables the public to enjoy healthy exercise. The Government strongly endorse that.

Andrea Jenkyns: I am on the Health Committee and was involved in the recent childhood obesity report, so I understand all the arguments. We need to encourage not just more women but more people—full stop—into sport. However, the case in question involves a very small parish council. I have mentioned that I chair the all-party group on local democracy, and parish councils do not have the same revenue streams as city and district councils. The parks must still be maintained.

I have been working with the National Association of Local Councils to lobby the Government so that, for example, when we devolve business rates to town and city councils through devolution deals, we also look at devolving some of them to parish councils as well, if the town and parish councils put a strong argument together. I am not a mathematician but I do not know how they can be expected to maintain something when often—I know this is true of some parish councils that I have dealt with through the group—they have a budget of a couple of grand a year. How can they pay to maintain the park when it is getting so much more use, if they have no more revenue streams?

Mr Jones: We have a strong relationship with NALC and I very much respect my hon. Friend’s work in the area in question, which is extremely important. We have had significant discussions and we have made it clear that the parish precept is the way in which parish councils will provide services. As I have said, in many other cases there are significant ways in which councils can legitimately secure other income for the use of facilities such as tennis courts and football pitches.

We were disappointed that, in asking people who use Little Stoke park for Parkrun to make what it describes as a contribution, Stoke Gifford parish council chose to become the first local authority in the country—indeed, as I understand it, the first in the world—effectively to charge for that type of community running event. It is quite legitimate to charge for specific facilities and specific activities. It is quite another thing to seek to overturn a long-standing tradition of free access to parks for everyday use. The Secretary of State has written to Councillor Brown, the chairman of Stoke Gifford parish council, about the matter. As I have explained, the Government strongly support the organising of events by communities on a voluntary basis to enable the public to enjoy healthy exercise. As my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke said, and as the Secretary of State put it, that is the sort of activity that local authorities should encourage, and I echo that sentiment.

Local authorities rightly have the power to charge for the use of specific facilities that they provide. The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 lists some of those facilities, such as sports centres, swimming pools, tennis courts, golf courses and bowling greens. The everyday use of a public park should not be charged for. Our parks and our green spaces are precious. It is entirely right that local authorities, which are entrusted to look after those valuable community assets, take their stewardship of them seriously. That should not be at the expense of the communities who use them.

Our parks are almost endlessly adaptable. They are more than turf and vegetation; they are a home to nature and a home away from home for communities of dog walkers, cyclists, and those who enjoy a stroll or a run. Every Saturday morning at 9 o’clock, in nearly 400 parks in the United Kingdom, they are the venue for a free Parkrun. Charging for facilities and events is quite legitimate. Seeking to charge for everyday use is not. I welcome the debate that we have had, and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke on securing it.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Steel Industry

[MRS MADELEINE MOON in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the UK steel industry.

Before I begin, I would like to congratulate the steel football club of Middlesbrough on re-entering the premier league this weekend. I congratulate the chairman, Steve Gibson, who yet again has shown what a great model can be provided by a fantastic chair over many years. It is high time he was given a knighthood for his services to football.

Today is about the British steel industry. I want to reiterate that the British steel industry has a future. It is not a sunset industry; it is not a basket case. We, as steel MPs, have hammered home the well-versed arguments of industry and Community, the steelworkers’ trade union, that the Government have not provided the will to back trade defence mechanisms, especially in the case of the lesser duty tariff; that Chinese and Russian dumping is causing chaos in the world, European and British steel markets; that an imposition of the carbon floor price on energy-intensives has had significant repercussions; and that compensation for the carbon price floor and the EU emissions trading system has been slow to non-existent, despite continuous British ministerial promises. Business rates also need fundamental reform.

Despite all that, only this week we saw seven potential buyers come forward with the intention of purchasing the remaining Tata assets. Those assets across the UK—from Port Talbot to Shotton, Trostre, Llanwern and Hartlepool—are manufacturing different products at different levels of the stream of steel production. Prior to that, Dalzell and Clydebridge were purchased by Liberty House. Various Caparo sites previously in administration were also purchased by Liberty. Long product sites such as the Teesside beam mill, Skinningrove and the integrated works at Scunthorpe were all purchased by Greybull Capital, with the intention of significant investment. That is not evidence of a sunset industry. Those are serious players with real desires to invest and make money.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): While those boons are obviously welcome, I am worried that we see it in the press that somehow everything is okay now. It is not. There is still a great deal of worry out there. I am particularly concerned about people who are leaving the industry to get jobs elsewhere because they do not see security for them and their families.

Tom Blenkinsop: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning Community, which is my union and former employer. Community has shown the positive role that trade unions, as well as a very good past. Leadership and inspiration should be matched by the trade unions, and UK Steel leading the employers? That leadership and inspiration should be matched by the Government in taking us forward and ensuring a bright future for steel, as well as a very good past.

Tom Blenkinsop: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point; I want to come to that later. Indeed, I believe the European Parliament is voting tomorrow on whether or not to grant China MES. Ultimately, the European Commission will have its say later in the year, but the implications for energy-intensive industries—not only steel, but manufacturing per se—go way beyond what anyone has talked about in any depth. That has been ignored to a certain extent—or, rather, quietly allowed to go under the radar—but the consequences for British manufacturing are profound.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that we have seen some tremendous leadership from both the Community union, leading the trade unions, and UK Steel leading the employers? That leadership and inspiration should be matched by the Government in taking us forward and ensuring a bright future for steel, as well as a very good past.

Tom Blenkinsop: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning Community, which is my union and former employer. Community has shown the positive role that trade unions can perform in partnership with employers. Mutual co-operation between employees and employers is necessary in order to get an industry through a difficult period, whether through a short-time working agreement, negotiating pensions or trying to find buyers for a steel site. Community is an exemplar in the trade union movement—I would say that, as a present Community trade union member and a member for many years, but there is a lot that the union movement can learn from it.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): Can we also talk about the purchase of British steel? Does the hon. Gentleman agree that local authorities and national Government can learn from the example set by North Lincolnshire Council, which has agreed a resolution that fully embeds the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, enabling the use of UK steel in its procurement policies and committing to using British steel in its construction projects wherever possible?

Tom Blenkinsop: I applaud that council for doing that; it is exactly what we wanted. The all-party parliamentary group on steel and metal related industries committed to step in and co-invest, instead of the miserable inaction of a Government paralysed by dogma? It was saved once, but the lessons of how that was achieved were ignored.

Our British steel industry is a world beater. Investors desire to own it. International market conditions are changing right now. Indeed, indicators regarding strip in the UK are far more positive. As world demand increases and Chinese steel sites are closed due to international pressure, we are well placed to capitalise on that, but only if we now rally hard behind our British steel industry.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): On the international situation, does my hon. Friend agree that a real acid test for the Government is their position on market economy status for China, which would be wholly illogical given the Chinese Government’s control over their native industry?

Tom Blenkinsop: I congratulate my hon. Friend for bringing that issue, because skills retention is key. There are historical precedents that the Government could look to—not very old ones, but from the previous Labour Government in 2010—for how to use facilities and Government finance in order to retain skills. I will get on to that a little later.

What could have been for the Teesside Cast Products site in Redcar, the second most efficient plant in Europe, if it had been given time and the Government had
called upon our local authorities, or any authority at any tier, to support British manufacturing, in particular steel, via the EEF. We worked with UK Steel and the trade unions in order to push that. It is good to see a local example of that.

We now need to rally hard behind our British steel industry. As I have said, examples of purchasers coming forward are clear. We now have seven buyers that have shown an intention to purchase the remaining strip/tube and the remaining assets. However, as I have said before, I do not think Tata has completely left the field. I suggest that there are potentially eight players on the field at present. It will be interesting to hear what the Minister says about Tata’s position and whether she believes it has completely left the field. I do not think it has, and it will be interesting to see in the coming days and weeks what Tata may or may not do.

The main issue, though, is how Tata continues to behave and whether it wants to be viewed in the full glare of the world’s media spotlight behaving in a sensible, rational and responsible manner. It remains incumbent upon the Government to provide the necessary oversight to ensure that Tata does exactly that, so that we can ensure current British steel capacity, ensure our defence and civil capability and demonstrate internationally that the UK values and wishes to protect an industry it leads the world in.

That brings me to the steel sector materials catapult and international competitiveness. The UK has some of the best expertise available globally for innovation in steel. As a result of its extensive expertise in both materials and energy, the Materials Processing Institute has been approached to join a national Swedish initiative to transform the steel industry in that country from coal-based to hydrogen and renewable energy over the next 20 years. At the end of this month, the institute will receive a delegation from the German steel industry, which has an interest in transitioning to more recycled and electric steelmaking.

Meanwhile, the UK has the opportunity, through the materials catapult proposal, to take advantage of our home expertise and leap ahead of our European competitors, yet the proposal has still not been taken up by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. I believe that could be achieved with a minimum of £5 million and could secure the research and development aspect that is vital to an industry moving forwards and developing. Again, that exposes the lack of an integrated industrial strategy on materials and materials research.

Tata clearly states that it has refused bids from cherry-pickers. However, the Government must remain vigilant. A total buy-out does not prevent a sudden, total closure. We now have seven buyers that have shown an intention to purchase the remaining strip/tube and the remaining assets. However, as I have said before, I do not think Tata has completely left the field. I suggest that there are potentially eight players on the field at present. It will be interesting to hear what the Minister says about Tata’s position and whether she believes it has completely left the field. I do not think it has, and it will be interesting to see in the coming days and weeks what Tata may or may not do.

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Tata clearly states that it has refused bids from cherry-pickers. However, the Government must remain vigilant. A total buy-out does not prevent a sudden, total closure of UK sites, so that a purchaser can retrench the position of, say, an integrated works in Holland—I can think of one such company, but I will not mention which. The Government must maintain that key watch role. Indeed, now is an ideal time for them, while potentially laying out a 25% equity stake, to specifically design a fully integrated industrial strategy to demonstrate to key investors what future they envisage for British steelmaking, not only to retain and maintain what capacity we already have, but to point to key investment opportunities so that we can hold our ground and increase our capacity and world market share. This is where the nation needs to leverage existing national excellence.

At the same time as the UK’s leading steel manufacturing institutes have come together to propose the materials catapult, it is understood that the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills is considering other, less suitable innovation providers to develop proposals to support the steel and wider metals industry. The danger is that public money will be used to duplicate and crowd out existing world-class providers. Instead, the Government should take up the materials catapult proposal, which is widely supported by the industry. It would build on our world-leading expertise, offer best value for money and have immediate nationwide benefits. Furthermore, a purely social response is that the Materials Processing Institute, part of the materials catapult bid, is situated in the borough of Redcar and Cleveland, footsteps from the edge of the former south bank coke ovens and the Teesside Cast Products integrated works, which no longer exist. An assurance of investment in the catapult would not only benefit the UK steel sector, but directly help an area so badly damaged by the loss of Sahaviriya Steel Industries in autumn last year.

My trade union, Community, is the leading union in the Save our Steel campaign to secure a sustainable future for the UK steel industry. As the sales process for the divestment of Tata Steel UK’s business proceeds, it is vital that the Government focus on the future of the UK steel industry. In answer to every question about an industrial strategy for the UK, the Secretary of State for Business has dismissed it as semantics, stating that the existence of the Steel Council demonstrates an industrial policy or approach that achieves the same outcomes. This is simply not the same as or comparable with a long-term coherent industrial strategy and does not ensure the future of the industry. The Government must stop dodging the issue now.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for introducing this important debate. Will he concede that the difficulties in the steel industry started in 1994, when 35,000 people were employed in the industry? The number stabilised around 2010 and has been stable since. Would it not be more sensible to have a cross-party constructive discussion to solve these problems?

Tom Blenkinsop: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. I have been chair of the all-party group on steel and metal related industries for five years and we have tried to reiterate the arguments for the steel industry. In 2012, when I first mentioned a debate about Thames Steel Services in Kent in the south-east of England, which is obviously not in my constituency but is part of the steel family, we did not get much of a hearing from the Government. Following that, we had further debates on the impending crisis, which we could see coming because of dumping from Chinese markets and other repercussions of Government policy. Ministers from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills responded. They were not even Ministers from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. I kindly suggest that the hon. Gentleman looks at the record of the last few years. Colleagues in this Chamber who are members of the all-party group from other parties are well aware of that history.

The Government must stop dodging the issue and start to work on a strategy to protect and boost the industry across the UK. A real concern is the amount of
time that Tata Steel is allowing for the sales process and that an arbitrary deadline will be imposed that is too soon for credible investors to develop a viable bid. Tata allowed time for the sale of its long products business to a credible investor. It should provide the same opportunity to bidders for the rest of its UK business as it allowed in every contemporary example, including SSI back in 2010 and Greybull Capital now—and, indeed, as was allowed in Tata’s own acquisition of Corus back in 2006.

The story is lost to some extent, but Tata achieved its purchase of Corus in competition mainly with a Brazilian company, and it achieved it only because in 2002 Tony Pedder, who headed up Corus at the time, was in competition with the same Brazilian company to create a merger, which then failed. Four years elapsed to allow Tata to purchase it. Some would argue that it paid an expensive share price, but that time elapsed and both competitors ratched up the share price because they thought the British assets were so key and vital, as they still are.

Public sector steel contracts must specifically consider UK steel, but I and my colleagues are concerned about recent reports that British steel is not being used in vital upcoming manufacturing projects—for example, Ajax vehicles. The Defence Minister, the right hon. Earl Howe, revealed in answer to a parliamentary question that 40% of the work building those vehicles will be carried out in Spain and a majority of the supplied steel will come from Sweden. This came after the Prime Minister hailed the deal as a boost for British manufacturing. Another example is the Aberdeen city bypass. Negotiations on a £12 million contract for 10,000 tonnes of rebar for the bypass have been reported as being at an advanced stage with Turkey.

Legislation and warm words are not enough to guarantee the viability and sustainability of a UK steel industry. The Government must act now to ensure that British steel is used in every public sector manufacturing contract and that British jobs are protected.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend has made some important points about procurement and the defence industry. His example of Aberdeen is particularly concerning, not least because rebar is one of the main products produced by the Celsa plant in my constituency. It has been used very successfully in projects such as Crossrail and elsewhere. Does he think it is time the Scottish Government fully explained their reasons? They said they would do everything they could to save steel jobs, but that seems to be falling down at the first hurdle.

Tom Blenkinsop: Indeed. In a spirit of cross-party politics, we want a positive response from the Scottish Government on revisiting that issue, looking at the contract and looking to British-sourced rebar steel, made in Britain by British workers, so that our British steel industry can thrive.

It is important to remember that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) has said, lack of customer confidence is the surest way to undermine the steel industry. The Government must work with Tata to ensure the continuity of client contracts. I know that a lot of work has been done on that in the background. It is essential to preserve the commercial viability of any sale. Retaining essential skills and competencies is vital for the future of the business. The highly skilled workforce cannot be allowed to fragment or disappear. Indeed, in 2010, £60 million was set aside by the then Labour Government to retain the existing workforce at Teesside Cast Products in Redcar. Not one hard redundancy was endured over a 22-month period among core Corus workers, to ensure that a purchase could allow a new owner to retain those workers. To avoid a fire sale and irreversible mistakes, the Government must demonstrate to all stakeholders in the industry that they are taking a proactive approach to ensuring the continuity of operations.

This is a time for leadership by the Government and no issue is more important for them to lead on than the lesser duty tariff. Europe currently uses the lesser duty rule to impose the lowest possible duties on unfairly traded products that have been dumped in European markets and exported at prices below those in the home market. Duties introduced by Europe are usually way below the actual margin of dumping, the result of which is that dumping continues and unfairly traded products are allowed to compete in European markets and depress prices.

The US does not follow the lesser duty rule, which means it can implement much tougher sanctions reflecting the margin of dumping. For example, it recently imposed duties of 236% on a particular grade of Chinese steel.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): My hon. Friend kindly mentioned Llanwern steel works. I also have Cogent Power Orb works in my constituency, which manufactures a very specialised steel product that is unique for Tata and profitable due to great management and a fantastic workforce. When I visited Cogent Orb in the last two weeks, I was told that in January as much steel came into Europe as in October, November and December 2015. Is it not clear that this is an ongoing problem and that we have not seen enough action yet?

Tom Blenkinsop: Most of the changes in the market have been market reaction, not a result of regulations. Trade defence mechanisms are sitting there waiting to be used. They could vastly improve the situation very quickly and help to prop up and support the industry. It is hard to know why those instruments have not been used, and I am certain that steelworkers find it excruciating that there are mechanisms and levers that the Government could use to at least sustain the situation during a period of dumping.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that, as many of my constituents in Ogmore have told me, there has been real leadership from Carwyn Jones and the Welsh Labour Government in the package they have put in place, within the powers they have, and that it is about time the UK Government stepped up to the plate and used the facilities and options available to them?

Tom Blenkinsop: First, I would like to congratulate and welcome my new hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) and say how privileged and happy I am to have him intervene during my speech. I believe that this is the first time he has spoken in the
House, so I am very honoured that he has taken this opportunity, but I am even more impressed by the fact that he has got straight into the job and is representing his constituents in a very steadfast way.

The US Government are in the process of introducing new laws that will enable the US to take even tougher action against Chinese dumping and which will make Europe an even more attractive target for dumping. However, there is hope, as it has become widely recognised in Europe that the lesser duty rule is killing our industry.

The European Commission has proposed that it should be scrapped, and that has been supported by the European Parliament. The European Commission is demonstrating the very reform and flexibility that the Prime Minister kept banging on about wanting to see in the European Union, so why will he and his Government not support the European Commission in that action?

I would be very happy if the Minister responded to that question, because that is the type of reform we want. When the facts and the market change, the mechanisms need to change. In my opinion, the reason why the lesser duty tariff has lasted so long is that the level of dumping was previously nowhere near the levels it has been at in the last four years. When the facts change, our trade defence mechanisms need to change in order to support our industry, yet even now the UK Government continue to lead the charge among the small group of nations blocking the scrapping of the lesser duty rule. Our own Government are arguing that end users of steel need access to cheap Chinese product.

Despite all the rhetoric, the UK Government are failing to stand up for our steel industry. They say they have delivered on four of the five industry asks, including “backing EU-level action on anti-dumping measures”, but the Government’s opposition to scrapping the lesser duty rule exposes the enormous gap between rhetoric and reality. Furthermore, on 5 February, the Secretary of State signed a heavily publicised letter to the Commission calling for Europe to “use every means available and take strong action” on Chinese dumping. That letter is simply not consistent with the Government’s position on the lesser duty rule.

Even more importantly over the coming weeks, the EU will make decisions that will impact on the granting of market economy status to China. It has become increasingly clear that Chinese dumping poses an existential threat to the UK and European steel industry. Despite that, the UK Government continue to act as a cheerleader for China in Europe in its bid for MES, whether in the European Union or not. Market economy status for China would be a complete disaster, as it would make it even harder for European producers to gain protection from unfairly traded Chinese imports. That issue is becoming more urgent, as the Commission must take a decision on it by December of this year, and the European Parliament votes on it tomorrow. I do not know, but I have heard that Tory MEPs are being whipped to vote that through. That has serious implications yet again, in terms of what the Government say and what the Government are prepared to do.

Stephen Doughty: I thank my hon. Friend for being generous with his time and giving way again. He makes an extremely important point about market economy status, and I absolutely agree. He highlights, aptly, that the crucial point in this is what the UK Government and Tory MEPs do in Europe and not, as some have suggested, that the European Union in some way putting the kibosh on the steel industry. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is misleading for Brexit campaigners to suggest that the steel industry in the UK would be better off if we left? The truth is that leaving the EU would be a body blow to the steel industry.

Tom Blenkinsop: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I know that the Minister will agree with this. What would we be saying, as a nation, to Greybull or the seven potential buyers of strip and tubes in Britain if we removed ourselves from the European Union? They are purchasing, obviously, in the context of our being a member of the European Union.

The implications of removing a pillar of the deal that has just happened—it took more than 12 months in relation to long products and Greybull—would be so massive that it does not bear thinking about, but then again, the Brexit campaign is more politically led than economically led. I make that quite clear because the matter is that important, and not just for steel. The Chemical Industries Association has come out very strongly for remaining within the European Union, as have trade unions in the manufacturing sector, because it is the only practical option if we are to retain any form of manufacturing in this country.

Another matter is business rates. This one cannot be immediately resolved, but it needs looking into. The review of business rates that concluded in advance of the Budget did not go far enough to deliver savings for UK producers. Business rates in the UK are up to 10 times higher than those paid by competitors in France and Germany. The Government should act now to level the playing field by removing plant and machinery from business rate calculations. Including plant and machinery in the calculations is anti-investment and anti-industry. Tata Steel recently invested £185 million in the construction of a new blast furnace in its Port Talbot steelworks and, in return for that investment, received a £400,000 increase in business rates. That is patently uncompetitive and ridiculous.

Back in March 2012, I gave a speech in relation to the closure of Thamesteel in Kent. That just goes to show how long we steel MPs in this place have been fighting, not just for our constituencies but for our countries’ steelworks, our steel culture, our steel families and our people. I want to repeat what I said that day, quoting a Teesside man of steel:

“When I see a blast furnace, I see a thing of beauty...I see something that has given thousands and thousands of people a way of life, a good, honest wage, the ability to pay their mortgages, go on holidays and bring up their families. That to me is fabulous, that is a beautiful thing. When you come to Middlesbrough and see that skyline...That blast furnace is the heart of Teesside. As long as it pumps, there is life in Teesside.”

It was not just a Teessider’s fairy tale when we saved TCP. The men and women from Kent, Stocksbridge, Rotherham, Hartlepool, Corby, Port Talbot, Shotton, Llanwern and Trostre all have the same view of their steelworks, as does every single steel community. It is a story for all steelworkers in Britain. There is a way to save our steel sites and UK steel if the Government do something to facilitate the process and lend their support, so the question for the Minister is: will you follow through on those promises, because now is the time for action?
Several hon. Members  

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. Given the number of hon. Members standing, some of whom have not notified the Chair of their wish to speak, I am imposing a five-minute limit on speeches. That may be reduced, depending on how the time goes and interventions.

2.57 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) on his brilliant speech, and Middlesbrough football club on getting to the premiership. It is good to see another Yorkshire team in the premiership.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Are we going to join them?

Angela Smith: It would be even better if another Yorkshire team, Sheffield Wednesday, joined Middlesbrough in a few weeks’ time. It is another steel football team.

I want to start by underscoring and supporting the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland about business rates, energy prices, Chinese dumping, skills retention and procurement, which are all very important. I will just add that the sales process that Tata is undertaking needs to hold to a deadline that allows for a sale that delivers responsible ownership for the future. There is a lack of confidence in the current deadline. The feeling is that it is not the right deadline, not the right timetable, so comments on that from the Government would be welcome.

In the previous debate on this issue, in the main Chamber, I spoke about speciality in my constituency. I talked about Tata in Stocksbridge and I will simply reiterate the point that we make some of the best steel in the world and we do that with the best workforce one could ask for. I will leave it at that. My key aim today is not to reiterate the comments that I made then, but to make the point that we have a responsibility not to lose that capacity, especially in such a strategically important industry, so in the rest of my speech, I will focus on making just two key points.

First, the role of the Government in the current situation demands leadership, as my hon. Friend pointed out. The Government have at last shown a willingness to engage, and we are obviously all very relieved about that. They have also demonstrated, I think and hope, that they will be pragmatic in their approach. However, we need the Government to fulfil a role that of strategic lead in ensuring that the Tata sales process is placed firmly in the context of how the industry needs to develop in the long term to secure its sustainability. We need that role to be taken on by the Government now with no more delays or prevarication. Will the Minister please give us that direction? Will she give us concrete actions that demonstrate confidence in the future of steel in the UK?

My second point relates to the importance of innovation in delivering sustainability, and I echo entirely the comments made by my hon. Friend. Innovation in manufacturing improves productivity and secures its future, and there is no better example of that than the steel city, Sheffield. Huntsman developed the crucible process in Sheffield and Harry Brearley developed stainless steel there. Bessemer built the first commercial application of the converter process in Sheffield, and that technology revolutionised steel making, improving its quality while lowering costs significantly, leading to a far wider range of applications for steel products. The steel city became the biggest steel producer in the world, mainly because of Bessemer and his process.

All Sheffielders are immensely proud of our city’s history and achievements. Steel is in the DNA of Sheffield. It is in our blood. We are also passionate about reasserting the fact that steel making is an industry of the future, not of the past. The impact that Bessemer’s technology had on steel making demonstrates entirely that that future depends on investment in research and development.

The Minister should put investment in innovation at the heart of her support for the steel industry and place it at the heart of the much needed industrial strategy for steel. I can think of no better way of doing that than by announcing, as a matter of urgency, that some of the £500 million allocated to the Higher Education Funding Council for England will be brought forward to ensure a timely response to the needs of an industrial, rather than an academic, timetable. Whichever way the Minister does it, she should do it.

The Government need to signal quickly that they understand the importance of innovation to steel and manufacturing. By so doing, they will help to underpin the search for a new long-term ownership and sustainable future for Tata Steel, and they will underpin and make more robust the long-term prospects for the whole steel-making capacity of the UK.

3.2 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) on securing the debate. There are many familiar faces here, which is no surprise as Labour Members have raised the issue of steel in the House well over 220 times since last May. The Save our Steel campaign has been exerting real pressure for more than a year. The work of Community and other unions and, most importantly, the thousands of steelworkers around the country, has been remarkable. Still, when crunch time came, the Secretary of State was caught unawares in Australia, and the Prime Minister was in the Canary Islands. Only when the situation became a public relations disaster did the Government start to wake up.

The announcement that the Government would take an equity stake and provide other forms of support was, of course, welcome. We know how much that must have hurt the Secretary of State, and we salute him for crossing the Rubicon and finally acknowledging that the Government have a role in building a well-functioning industrial base. Who knows, having had that damascene conversion, he may even be ready to utter the words “industrial strategy” now. Stranger things have happened. Unfortunately, that realisation came too late for the people of Redcar, as my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) so movingly described a few weeks ago. It is a betrayal for which the Government shall not be forgiven—a betrayal that deserves no forgiveness.
The Government now have the opportunity to ensure that they do not make the same mistake twice. I have more simple questions. The first is on energy costs. The compensation package is of course welcome, but much more can be done. At Port Talbot, large amounts of gas, particularly from the coke ovens, are recycled and used as energy. It is, by definition, a form of renewable energy. Why, therefore, can we not receive renewables obligation certificates for it?

In addition to the plans for a new generator, Tata has submitted an investment package of £130 million, which would upgrade equipment and deliver massive energy efficiencies and cost savings. I understand that the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills has carried out the technical investigation, but has yet to give the project the green light. Can the Minister explain why there has been such a delay in giving the green light?

It is possible that state aids are an issue but I have been in contact with Commissioner Vestager and, in a letter to me, she quite clearly stated that she remains “ready to work with the UK authorities on how best to make use of the possibilities offered by EU State aid rules to support energy intensive industries.”

The offer of help is there. Why do we not use it?

Secondly, for Port Talbot, Trostre and Llanwern, business rates are devolved, so a co-operative approach between Westminster and Cardiff is needed. Tata strip, speciality and bar pay £28 million a year in business rates. Meanwhile, the IJmuiden plant in the Netherlands pays £2.5 million a year in business rates. How can we possibly justify UK business rates that are more than 11 times those in the Netherlands?

I understand the Government’s concerns and fears about setting a precedent on business rates and about the broader implications that would have. However, that is simply a matter of setting down and sorting it out. The Government could set a tapered ceiling by saying that the only businesses where plant and machinery could be exempted are those with, for example, capital expenditure of more than £30 million or those with more than 3,000 employees. They could specify that only companies fitting those criteria would be exempt.

Thirdly, on procurement, the Government have trumpeted their changes to procurement guidelines, and they should be congratulated on those changes. However, as we learned on Monday with the news that the latest set of British Ajax battle tanks would largely be built in Spain with Swedish steel, those changes are utterly toothless. That news seriously questions the Government’s commitment not only to British steel, but to British industry more broadly.

The Secretary of State has spoken of his desire for a new industrial revolution. Well, steel is central to that. Earlier this week, Nick Reilly, the former head of GM Europe, said:

“If we lose the steel industry in this country...There is a high risk that maybe one of the manufacturers—maybe Vauxhall, maybe Toyota, maybe Nissan—will move out of the country if they cannot source steel locally. The real risk then is that that could snowball and the majority of the manufacturers go.”

That is a key consumer of steel making it clear that the end of British steel will be the end of much more. As Mr Reilly concluded:

“What we are then talking about is not the 30,000 to 40,000 jobs at risk in the steel industry, but hundreds of thousands of jobs across British industry.”

The situation could not be more urgent. I implore the Minister to answer the questions as specifically as possible, and that that answer is not more committees, working groups and warm words with frozen actions. I implore him: let us start to see some real action on the issues of energy, procurement and the dumping of Chinese steel, so that we can finally give some confidence to the future of the British steel industry.

3.7 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop), who, as always, is bang on the money regarding the British steel industry. He brings his incredible experience and insight to the debate and I am proud to sit alongside him on these Benches.

I welcome the positive news about the number of potential buyers for Tata sites. The people of Teesside will be pleased to hear that positive news for steel communities around the UK. As my hon. Friend said, that is testament to the fact that the argument is, at last, being won. Steel is not a sunset industry and has a vital long-term role in the future of British manufacturing. It is also a positive statement that Britain can be a global leader in steel with the right support and, as other hon. Members have said, a serious industrial strategy from the Government. I am glad that the Government seem to have learnt their lesson, albeit at a terrible cost to us on Teesside.

I have spoken before about the anger still felt in Redcar that nothing was done to save our steel making from closure. We have never had answers to the questions I posed in the previous debate on the topic, when I asked why European state aid rules were a barrier to co-investing with Sahaviriya Steel Industries but are not for the companies now coming forward for the Tata sites, and why the private sector options that we put before the Minister—which would have kept the coke ovens going and mothballed the blast furnace, rather than losing our national assets for good—were not taken up. I also asked why the Government said that they could not put British taxpayers’ money into Thai banks. Why are they any different from the investors coming forward now? There is still a justified sense of anger on Teesside when people see the Government pulling out all the stops now, and feel that nothing was done for us, but I do not want to keep looking back. We must rebuild and get back on our feet, and we are doing that.

I start, as my hon. Friend did, by congratulating everyone at Middlesbrough football club—the chairman, Steve Gibson, the manager, Aitor Karanka, all the players, the staff and, of course, the fans—for a well-deserved promotion to the premier league.

The situation could not be more urgent. I implore the Minister to answer the questions as specifically as possible, and that that answer is not more committees, working groups and warm words with frozen actions. I implore him: let us start to see some real action on the issues of energy, procurement and the dumping of Chinese steel, so that we can finally give some confidence to the future of the British steel industry.
I welcome the fact that the shadow board for the South Tees development corporation met for the first time yesterday. It is a strong board with a great deal of local experience and expertise, and I look forward to working with the development corporation on the future of the SSI site. That site can play a major role in job creation and the economic regeneration of the area.

I want to briefly set out two key areas where I think steel can play a key role in driving the regeneration of Teesside. The first is in relation to steel and the circular economy. While we may never be able to forge steel again without our blast furnace, there is a great opportunity on Teesside to lead the way in metal remanufacturing, refurbishment and recycling. The second area is in research and development. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, I urge the Minister to give a high priority to the benefit of the materials catapult on Teesside at the Materials Processing Institute. The MPI pilot-scale electric arc furnace in Redcar is the only example of its kind in the UK and offers innovation, process development and future opportunities in the adoption of electric arc furnace technology.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): I could not agree more with what the hon. Lady is saying about catapult centres, but, for firms like Mettalis in my constituency, it would be better to incentivise R&D credits across the piece and also look at the other method of driving innovation, which would be to make the enterprise investment scheme applicable to steel as well.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. It is inappropriate for the hon. Lady to arrive part-way through the debate and then make an immediate intervention.

Anna Turley: I appreciate the hon. Lady’s point because I do not think it should be an either/or: we can work together on investing seriously in research and development in steel.

On the MPI facility, no other such facility in Europe possesses equal capability. Support for a materials catapult on Teesside will give British steel making the cutting edge in research and development, encouraging greater investment and resilience for the industry. The MPI, as my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland has said, has had a direct approach from Sweden. We have also got experts coming from Germany, Australia and Holland. If foreign Governments and commercial operators are engaging with our researchers in the UK to future-proof their steel sectors, can the Minister explain why it is such a struggle to convince officials in the British Government? Do they know something that industry and innovation experts do not?

So those two areas show the potential that we have on Teesside for steel to play a key role in our economic regeneration. It must not be forgotten that we have a thriving chemicals industry and a dynamic port. We have potential for more investment in energy from waste, carbon capture and storage, carbon dioxide conversion and potash mining. When oil and gas recovers, that can also play a vital role in our economy. I thank the Government for making Redcar College one of its spokes for national colleges for oil and gas. We have great opportunities. Boro have done their bit to get us in the premier league; now it is time for all of us to step up.

3.12 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) on securing this important debate today. I rise to speak not because I have a major steel manufacturer in my constituency, but because I have more foundries than any other constituency in the country. I want to emphasise the strategic importance of the steel industry to the metals industry throughout the country. Quite rightly, the focus has been on the immediate impact of the steel industry’s demise on employees and the communities surrounding steel production, but the knock-on effect will spread throughout manufacturing and the key manufacturing regions in this country. The west midlands, particularly the black country, is hugely significant in that respect.

The foundry industry in the black country is absolutely crucial to two other manufacturing success stories in this country: automobile manufacturing and civil aviation. Anything that reduces the capacity of those two industries to be successful and to drive our exports will have implications far beyond the immediate closure of the steel industry.

I want to compliment the West Midlands Economic Forum, a research group, and its steel taskforce, which is trying to bottom out the implications for local industry of the demise of the steel industry and act as a mouthpiece for it in securing alternative supplies. We must be clear that there is a real threat to companies. We know that some are already seeking alternative suppliers of steel, quite rightly, because they need continuity and certainty for their forward business planning. If they cannot rely on the British steel industry surviving, then for their own survival, they have to look elsewhere. That vicious circle has implications for our national steel industry. Even if we get it up and running—I believe it has a great future if we do—it could lose some of its future market share as a result of the decisions made during this period of uncertainty.

It is absolutely essential that we have more from the Government than just the benign warm words about the industry that we have heard. My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) emphasised that we need a proactive declaration that will generate confidence not just among the steel-producing industry but among the thousands of small businesses that depend on it for their future. That means seeing what measures are being taken in Europe within the very tight rules that I admit the EU applies to ensure that there is not unfair and uncompetitive practice. Other Governments in the EU have successfully done that in support of their industry.

Finally, I will cite investment in research and development. In France, there is investment of €20 million to €30 million a year, leveraging further private investment; €19.1 million has been given to the German Salzgitter company for innovative new steel processes; and there is long-standing relief in Germany for energy costs worth
up to an estimated €8 billion a year. If they can do it in Germany, we should be able to do it here. We look to our Government to say that they are willing to implement such measures, to provide the necessary reassurance and confidence that our steel industry will survive and that its role in manufacturing will continue.

3.17 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Moon. I thank the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) for securing this important debate. His commitment to our steel industry is unwavering, and it is a pleasure to work alongside him and all the other members of the all-party group on steel.

With a steel finishing plant in my constituency, much of my parliamentary time since becoming a Member has been dedicated to this subject. Fortunately, the future of that plant, and the plant in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), is known. I once again put on record my thanks to the Scottish Government, and also of Tata and Liberty House. The task of saving Scottish steel was not an easy one, but we on the Scottish steel taskforce rose to it. The future of the industry in the rest of the UK, although not a certainty, looks more promising than it did a number of weeks ago. With seven bidders now interested in taking over Tata Steel’s operations, I hope that colleagues around this room will soon be celebrating the saving of industry and jobs in their constituencies.

Stephen Doughty: I am glad to hear those words of support for the steel industry in the rest of the UK, but obviously we need action as well. Can the hon. Lady explain the apparently advanced stage of negotiations with Turkey for 10,000 tonnes of rebar and a £12 million contract for the Aberdeen bypass? That rebar could be bought from UK suppliers. Does she have any information on that, and does she agree that we need to do everything possible to ensure that UK suppliers are used?

Margaret Ferrier: More than £115 million has already been awarded to subcontractors based in Scotland, and with an estimated £60 million of subcontracts still to be advertised during the construction phase through the Public Contracts Scotland website, there is still plenty of opportunity for other UK-based companies to bid.

As Members will no doubt be aware, however, the celebration will be short-lived. The steel industry still faces some fairly hefty challenges, and it is up to us to continue piling pressure on the Government to ensure that the correct measures are taken, to safeguard the industry and protect jobs. It would be remiss of me not to recognise the measures that the Government have so far taken. Efforts have been made to help steel and other energy-intensive industries, for which we are all grateful. More undeniably remains to be done, and it is not only about taking action; it is about a shift in the Government’s thinking. In Scotland, the approach is to view steel as a vital strategic asset. The Scottish Government have outlined their vision for the industry and, in doing so, their commitment to it. As resilient as our centuries-old steel industry has been, it will survive only with the proper support. That means taking steps to address the unfair playing field of the global market. The industry wants the anti-dumping investigation process to be hastened—it is much more rapid in the United States than in the EU. I would like the UK Government to take UK Steel’s recommendation on board and, through the European Council, work with the Commission to set out a clear action plan and timetable for changes to speed up the process.

Action must also be taken on the lesser duty rule. We are clearly at an impasse between what industry has been calling for and what the Government are prepared to do. UK Steel has made pragmatic suggestions of ways to change how tariffs are calculated without necessarily scrapping the rule. I would like the Government to engage with it to find a steel sector solution that will ensure that future duties are robust enough to tackle unfair imports.

As I have mentioned many times, we continue to head towards market economy status for China, without properly addressing the dumping issue. The industry has issued grave warnings that that could lead to serious job losses across many sectors, and I would like a proper response from the Minister about how China can be given market economy status while the effectiveness of the EU’s trade defence instruments is preserved. I would also like to know more about what further action has been taken on energy costs. We are at a disadvantage compared with other European countries, and I should like a full and frank response on how wholesale costs are to be brought down.

3.23 pm

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I thank the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop), a great parliamentary champion of steel, for securing this all too crucial debate. I also thank him for giving evidence to the Select Committee on Business, Innovation and Skills on 28 April, during its inquiry on the UK steel industry, as a follow-up to our December report. Yet again he gave the Committee his valuable insight and wisdom about, and experience of, the industry. Steelworkers and the steel industry could not be better represented in this place than by my friend and colleague.

Reference has already been made to trade defence instruments and market economy status, and I will not dwell on them. I want to focus on three things: time, confidence and Government action. On the question of time, I do not think anyone can be any doubt that, given the scale and relative complexity of the operations, the sale of Tata’s steel business will not be a straightforward or quick process. Such sales take years to plan and execute. Although it is welcome that there are seven bidders expressing an interest, and a firm offer is needed sometime after 23 June, due diligence and negotiations on matters such as the pension scheme will take time. Bimlendra Jha, the chief executive officer of Tata Steel in the UK, said to the Select Committee that with the kind of losses that Tata is enduring, “urgency is important. We cannot continue to bleed.” He would not commit to a definite timescale, nor to keeping all steel facilities in the UK open and all jobs safeguarded within those facilities until such time as a buyer is found and a deal formally done.
[Mr Iain Wright]

That being the case, the role of Government is crucial. What can the Government do to safeguard assets, capability and employment during this potentially lengthy sales process? Will the Minister articulate further the nature of any co-investment? Would the Government provide bridging finance and other help to cover the transition between Tata ownership and the new owners of the business?

Anna Turley: Does my hon. Friend share my view that it would be helpful if the Government set out some of the criteria that they are considering in relation to co-investment and support?

Mr Wright: That is crucial. Any such commitment would provide much needed confidence in our steel industry, as well. It is a foundation industry that is strategic in its importance to the economy and vital to our manufacturing base.

That brings me on to my second point: confidence. I have pushed the Minister and the Secretary of State on the matter, because it is of central importance. The Minister heard that for herself from the local management and workforce when she visited the Hartlepool pipe mill a couple of weeks ago. Suppliers and customers have the perception that the Tata steel business will not be there in a couple of months’ time, as it might have been pushed into administration. Suppliers, certainly in our part of the country, have had their fingers burned with the closure of SSI. They do not want to be an unsecured creditor in an administration situation, with the likelihood of receiving no money and being out of pocket, and the possibility that their own business will come under threat.

Customers for Tata’s steel products, especially in sectors such as energy, infrastructure and oil and gas, have very long-term horizons in their requirements. They want to be certain that their orders will be there. If they are not, they will look elsewhere. That is not in the long-term interests of the UK steel industry or the viability of Tata’s successors. Credit lines and insurance are being withdrawn, and I cannot stress how important that is. What else can the Minister do— I know that she has worked hard behind the scenes—to provide extra reassurance, further commitments and definite indicators of confidence? Perhaps that would include the public sector placing orders with Tata Steel.

That brings me to my third point, which is about Government action. Procurement is one of the industry’s requests for Government action, and that theme flows through my other points. The Minister must be aware that she has not delivered in full what could be provided for the steel industry. Everyone is aware of the massive global forces at work, with steel prices and overcapacity, but Mr Jha told the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee that UK steel manufacturers suffer from structural weakness—business rates, energy costs and procurement. What is the Minister going to do about that? We should not be looking to the past. Although we should celebrate our steel past, we should look to a future with steel as a massively important part of a modern manufacturing industry.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. Despite the generosity of the Scottish National party spokesman in offering to reduce his speech time, I am going to have to reduce the time to three minutes.

3.27 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) on securing this most important debate.

Steel and the steel industry are vital to the UK, Wales and my constituency. The Tata steel plant in Port Talbot is in the neighbouring constituency of Aberavon and the Trostre plant is in the nearby constituency of Llanelli. Hundreds of my constituents go to work in those places every day. I have personal knowledge of the community that has grown up around the plants. My father worked at the site of the Steel Company of Wales, which is now Tata Steel. When I was at Cynffig Comprehensive School I played hockey for the Steel Company of Wales. It was the centre of the community. The plant put food on our plates at home and contributed enormously to our social and sporting lives. The same sense of community is felt today by the 4,500 workers and their families who still work at and depend on the plants.

A constituent of mine, Andrew, started as a technical apprentice at British Steel, Port Talbot, in 1994 and worked his way up to the role of laboratory manager. Having spent his entire working life at Port Talbot, Andrew is passionate about steel and the steel industry and is committed to its future in the local community, often championing the company and the apprenticeship schemes. Andrew has made a great many friends over the years, and many of these friendships are forged in a way that cannot happen in other industries; 12-hour shifts in a challenging environment pull people together in a way that makes them feel more like family, and when pain is felt by their colleagues it is felt by all.

Anna Turley: Does my hon. Friend share my view that when a community is hit by a tragedy such as this, it is incumbent on all of us—Government, Members of Parliament and everyone—to make sure that the community sticks together and that people are supported through a difficult time?

Christina Rees: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. It is time to work together. The uncertainty over the past 12 months has been greater than at any time in Andrew’s 21-year career. Owing to the cyclical nature of the steel industry, there have always been highs and lows. Andrew told me about his personal experience of the past few months:

“Back at the end of 2015 I wondered how we can continue with the losses being incurred. Time and time again, Tata asked the Government for help with trade restrictions, yet, month after month we were informed that our losses were huge.”

From initial despair to waves of hope, the plant continued to operate under the most trying of circumstances.

I have asked questions in the Chamber, but I wish to press the point again. Will the Government use the current threat to the UK steel industry as an opportunity to change the way we do things, so that innovations and a thought-through structure can be established that will protect the steel industry for many years to come?
Innovation is already taking shape in Neath Port Talbot. SPECIFIC—the sustainable product engineering centre for innovative functional industrial coatings—is an academic and industrial consortium led by Swansea University, involving several strategic partners, and funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, Innovate UK and the European regional development fund via the Welsh Government. SPECIFIC’s vision is to deliver buildings that generate, store and release their own energy, which is an example of a radical and transformative energy solution using buildings as energy systems. Steel is a key element of that, and SPECIFIC is working with Port Talbot steelworks and its downstream operations to develop functional coatings for steel, which rely on high quality steel. Together, they are creating a pipeline of products for the future that will help to ensure that we have a sustainable and competitive steel industry.

SPECIFIC and Tata are working on innovation in construction, and those products and systems, such as solar integrated roofing products and new forms of heating system, are already entering the marketplace. Steel from Port Talbot is being turned into systems in Shotton. No matter what the asset base or ownership of any future UK steel model, technology and innovation are critical, and it is equally critical that such technology and innovation are in close proximity to the major steel-making sites.

3.31 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I praise my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) for leading the debate with such knowledge, passion and authority, as he always does.

There have been some excellent contributions so far, and I will focus on a few specific points, rather than reiterating things I have previously said in our many debates on steel. As always, I pay tribute to the Celsa workforce and management in my constituency, and to the work of Community, GMB, the other trade unions and UK Steel. I praise Carwyn Jones, the First Minister, for his leadership in recent months. He has worked constructively with the UK Government on these issues. His leadership was head and shoulders above the others’, and it is deeply concerning to hear in the last 10 minutes that apparently the Conservatives, Plaid Cymru and UKIP have voted together to block his reappointment as First Minister, which is quite extraordinary when we need a First Minister in Wales to get back on with addressing crises such as the steel crisis.

I reiterate my point about the EU. We are approaching the referendum, which is a crucial decision for the country, but it is also a crucial decision for the steel industry, the engineering industry, the automotive sector and all those other sectors about which my hon. Friends have spoken. It would be a body blow to the steel industry for us to come out of the EU, particularly given the single market and the lack of clarity on what sort of market we would have were we to come out. The Minister knows my views about market economy status and the lesser duty rule, and all I would ask is what the Government will do in the European Parliament and at the Foreign Affairs Council on 13 May on the issue of China. Will they continue to press the issue in Europe? Ultimately, it is what the UK Government do on this in Europe that matters. We can achieve more for the steel industry by working together across the continent.

Briefly, on net energy costs, which are particularly important to Celsa as it uses an electric arc furnace, UK Steel rightly points out that: “electricity costs make up 11% of an integrated steel plant’s marginal costs and 20% for an electric arc furnace.” Yet we are still seeing prices that are uncompetitive. Despite the energy intensive industries compensation package, we are still seeing prices that are in the region of 25% higher than in Germany. What consideration has been given to any further review of the carbon price floor and the climate tax impact? What about network costs and wholesale costs? Are there additional measures that could be taken there?

Finally, on procurement, worrying information about the Ajax vehicles was shared in the Daily Mirror, which has been leading the way in campaigning on steel. The majority of the steel for those vehicles will come from Sweden, and 489 hulls will be built in Spain before being brought over to Merthyr Tydfil. Surely that cannot be right. Can the Minister provide any assurances about the new Type 31 frigates? Indeed, can she update us on whether the Ministry of Defence is keeping accurate records? Obviously, if we do not know what the records are, we do not know where the steel is coming from and we cannot take the necessary action.

3.34 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak this afternoon. I will address the two key issues of business rates and dumping—I raised the latter earlier at Prime Minister’s questions. Clearly, firmer action needs to be taken on both issues. Very little progress has been made on business rates. The opening remarks of the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) were relevant, and the Government should consider exempting the steel industry from those charges.

The point I made at Prime Minister’s questions related to dumping, which is key to this debate. I had a good meeting yesterday with the Industrial Communities Alliance, which raised its concerns in the strongest possible terms. Clearly, when we look around the world, other countries are taking robust action on Chinese dumping. The Obama Administration, with which I disagree on a lot of issues, has taken strong action, and rightly so. We have seen duties of 288% imposed. What consideration have the Government given to such steps as part of the international comparison group? That group has met, and we should learn lessons from around the world where we can.

I am also aware that the lesser duty rule will be discussed at the June European Council meeting, so it would be interesting to know whether the Government have any scope to review their position in advance. The key debate in Corby at the moment, however, is on the future of the Corby Tata site. People are rightly worried about what the future holds, and it is encouraging that considerable interest is being shown in obtaining the portfolio, but it must be the right deal. Confidence will be key to that. Ministers have been right to talk about the importance of confidence for buyers and suppliers.
We need more of that confidence, and we need more of that work. We need the Government to wade in and make the case.

Long term, the future of the industry will depend on strong action on dumping and more work on the other asks. In particular, bringing forward the energy exemption package might help. I am grateful to the Minister for coming along with me to the Tata site in Corby a few weeks ago. We met the excellent Labour leader of the council, who has been very good on this issue, on which we work closely—it is important that we put party differences to one side and work together. The message was clear: the industry, and the Corby site in particular, needs time and investment. We have a strong plan in place, and we need the opportunity to see it through. Anything the Minister can do to help us achieve that would be hugely appreciated by me and my constituents.

3.37 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) not only for securing this debate and for his robust speech but for his stoush defence of the steel industry during his time in Parliament and previously as a regional trade union organiser. I also pay tribute to Community and the other unions for their work and drive to save the steel industry in Scotland and elsewhere.

We have heard some useful contributions today, including from the hon. Gentleman, and the message that stands out to me is that the steel industry has a future. It is not a basket case. Absolutely agree, and that is the fundamental base from which we must approach the issue and upon which it must be grounded. We must talk up the industry as he did, not talk it down as others have in the past.

The hon. Gentleman and almost every other speaker in this debate posed serious questions to the Minister regarding the lesser duty rule and tomorrow’s vote on Chinese market economy status, to which I hope she will respond. We have heard some useful contributions today, including from the hon. Members for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White), for Newport East (Jessica Morden), for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), for Redcar (Anna Turley), for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey), for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), for Neath (Christina Rees) and for Corby (Tom Pursglove) and from my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier). The very good debate we have had, to which they all contributed, and the turnout for it are a tribute to the industry.

It is worth stating on the record again that the Scottish National party Scottish Government have worked determinedly to find a new operator for the Dalzell and Clydebridge steel plants, and to maintain industrial steel production in Scotland. We said that we would leave no stone unturned and that is exactly what we did.

It is also vital that the UK Government now work more co-operatively with the EU on anti-dumping measures, and bring forward a credible strategy—

Angela Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Neil Gray: I have given a commitment that my speech will be very brief, to allow steel MPs to have their say, so for that reason I will not take interventions.

The Government must bring forward a credible strategy for heavy industry in the UK and take similar concerted action to save steel plants, steel jobs and steel communities in England and Wales. There have been job losses at UK steel plants for a number of years, especially as a result of Chinese steel, as has been outlined. The warning signs were there for the industry. The UK Government have been slow to act in the face of these challenges.

We urge the UK Government to work with trade unions and potential investors as the Scottish Government have done, to find a future for the workers at the English and Welsh steel plants. In the short term, it is critical that strong anti-dumping measures are secured with our EU partners. Whereas the EU imposed a tariff of up to 16% on dumped Chinese cold-rolled steel, the US recently fixed duties on it at 266%. As the hon. Member for Corby said at Prime Minister’s questions earlier today and indeed in this debate, we wonder whether the Prime Minister’s recent meetings with the US President, Barack Obama, allowed him to learn from the way that the US has acted in this regard.

The Business Secretary was reportedly the ringleader in blocking the EU’s attempts to regulate Chinese steel entering Europe—that is according to a spokesperson for the European Steel Association. That would be indefensible. Moreover, the Scottish Government have been excluded from talks on steel dumping, which is also outrageous, despite our request to be involved because of our interest in Scottish plants.

I take the opportunity again to pay tribute to and congratulate the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland on securing this debate, and I offer our support and solidarity as he and others in this House work to deliver a bright future for the steel industry in this country.

3.42 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship for the first time, Mrs Moon.

I too congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop), both on securing this debate and on the promotion of Middlesbrough Football Club. I am just sorry that it is not Cardiff City being promoted this year. One of the proudest moments I ever had was being awarded the man of steel award by his union, Community, when I was first a Member of this House and campaigning on the Allied Steel and Wire pension scheme, but he is absolutely a man of steel. Whatever he does not know about the steel industry is simply not worth knowing.

I also congratulate my other hon. Friend and other hon. Members for their contributions, including my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), who mentioned Bessemer Road in Sheffield.
As an example of the links between different steel communities, there is also a Bessemer Road in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), bordering on my constituency. That just emphasises the links and the sense of community and solidarity between different steel communities.

I also congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and for Redcar (Anna Turley) on their contributions. She has defended her constituents with incredible passion and energy, and I just want to express our solidarity with her and her constituents over what has happened in Redcar. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) reminded us of the wider economic impact of steelmaking, particularly in his region, the midlands.

Although I welcome the expressions of solidarity from the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), I must say that I thought what she said about the Aberdeen bypass, after an intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, was staggeringly complacent. It was a breathtaking answer that did not practically express the solidarity with steelworkers in Wales, England and other parts of the United Kingdom in the way that we had expected. There needs to be some more reflection on the importance of that solidarity being expressed right across the United Kingdom.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), the Chairman of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, who is doing incredible work on this subject in that role. My hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) again spoke with passion about the importance of the steel industry in her community.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth told us the incredible news that the Conservative party, Plaid Cymru and the UK Independence party have just formed an alliance in the Welsh Assembly to block the appointment of the Labour First Minister. They have no mandate to do that, and to do it at a time when we are in crisis over the steel industry is the kind of game-playing politics that will not be forgotten in our steel communities in the future.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), who represents a very important steel-making community in this House, and the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), who spoke for the Scottish National party at the end of the debate, on their contributions.

I will not speak for too long because I want the Minister to have a chance to respond to the debate and I also want my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland to have at least a brief opportunity to respond to her remarks. However, we are in a situation now where we can see the impact on our economy of what is happening in the steel industry. Manufacturing crawled ahead with 0.1% growth in March, barely reversing the 0.9% decline we saw in February, and output in the sector is 1.9% below what it was a year ago. Those are the worst figures for the last three years. The recovery is not happening in manufacturing.

“The march of the makers”—[Official Report, 23 March 2011; Vol. 525, c. 966]—is not occurring in manufacturing. We know that the plight of UK steel, drowning under the flood of Chinese steel, has contributed to that, as well as the uncertainty over the Brexit referendum and so on and the impact that is having on our industries.

We are seeing the impact in things such as the closure—the unnecessary closure—of the Redcar steel plant. Basic iron and steel manufacturing is down 37.3% a year on from the figures in March 2015. That is the sort of impact that this situation is having. I will quote Lee Hopley, the chief economist of EEF, the manufacturers organisation. I think the Minister criticised me for quoting the EEF in a previous debate, but Lee Hopley said:

“There isn’t too much in the data to lift economic spirits as a small increase in manufacturing output in March doesn’t change the picture of an overall weak start to the year.”

That is the economic background to today’s debate. We cannot afford to let the steel industry in this country die, because if it does the impact will go far beyond the steel-making communities that we have heard so much about today.

I will just reiterate the key points that the Minister needs to address, following this annus horribilis that we have had in the steel industry under this Government’s leadership. It is not all the fault of the Government, but it is their responsibility to respond, and to respond quickly and effectively.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland said, the insufficient action on trade defence mechanisms is the first charge against the Government—their slow response. More important is the lesser duty rule, which my hon. Friend also mentioned. Why are the Government still resisting getting rid of or re-forming the lesser duty rule, but instead leading the opposition in Europe? Why are the Government not moving ahead with the reform of business rates that has been mentioned by so many speakers today?

There has been a failure to provide the bridge to the future in Redcar. We know what the implications of that failure are. We also know that the steel industry is not a dying industry. As my hon. Friend said, seven potential buyers have come forward to show interest in purchasing the remaining Tata/SSI assets. However, my hon. Friend also said there is a possibility that Tata itself might still be interested in this situation. What is the Minister’s response to that? Is that a serious possibility? Can she tell us anything about that?

Also, can the Minister tell us whether the Government will now swallow their pride and admit that they need to have an industrial strategy and to call it an industrial strategy, and to set it out clearly for us? Can she also answer the points that my hon. Friend made about the catapult and the importance to the UK steel sector and to research and development for the future, if we are going to have a future for our steel industry?

Mr Betts: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Kevin Brennan: I will not give way, because it would be unfair of me not to leave enough time for the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland to respond to the debate. However, I note the presence of yet another Sheffield MP here in debate.
[Kevin Brennan]

As I said, the Business Secretary should swallow his pride over an industrial strategy. What assurances can the Government give us that there will be sufficient time for the sale? None of us is convinced that the current timetable is necessarily achievable. What more will the Minister do on procurement, on making sure that the customer base is preserved, on making sure the highly skilled workforce are not lost and on taking action on tariffs? Finally, will she recognise the danger for our industries of market economy status being granted to China?

On that point, and to allow the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland sufficient time to respond to the debate, I conclude my remarks.

3.49 pm

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): It is an absolute joy and pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mrs Moon. As ever, it has been a very good debate. I nearly said that we have had the full set that we always have in a debate on steel, but we are missing from the Public Gallery the excellent Mr Roy Rickhuss, who leads the outstanding Community union. I am sure he will be following these events and reading about them in Hansard.

As ever, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) for securing this debate. I also pay tribute to all those who work in our steel industry—management and workers—and to all those, including the unions, who have been playing such an outstanding role in this incredibly difficult past 12 months. I make it very clear that I want to make a complaint about the hon. Gentleman, because I think he had a quick look at my speech. I thought it was brilliant that he opened on that very positive note. I wanted to do that in my speech.

Unusually for me, I will read certain things out, including quite a few facts and figures, because I want to make it absolutely clear that there is no disagreement among us on this: we all believe that steel genuinely has a future in the United Kingdom. There is no debate either about the quality of the steel we make here and the outstanding quality of the workforce.

We know that it is important—"vital", in the words of the Prime Minister—that we have a strong British steel sector. In economic terms, steel was worth some £1.7 billion in 2014, representing 0.1% of the total UK economy. At that time—sadly, it is not the case now—it employed 34,500 people. As so many Members on both sides of the House know, the steel industry is a critical, integral part of many places and communities. The Government are clear that the steel industry has a viable long-term future in the United Kingdom, and that is why we have taken unprecedented action.

I have to chide Opposition Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) praised his local Labour leader because he does not care what party they represent; they are working together and fighting in the right way in the interests of everyone at Corby. I am sometimes a little saddened that Opposition Members never give some credit for the outstanding work that this Government have done in relation to the future of the steel industry.

Mr Iain Wright: Don’t push it!

Anna Soubry: I will push it now, because I always like a challenge.

Mr Betts: Will the Minister give way?

Anna Soubry: In a moment. I am happy to allow the hon. Gentleman a quick name check, but I want to make this point first: this Government have taken unprecedented action and given unprecedented support for our steel industry. This Conservative Government have said that we are willing for a potential buyer to look at investing hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money by way of debt financing. That includes looking at power plants, notably at Port Talbot, so that we can keep those blast furnaces open. We are also looking to take up to a 25% stake or share in that new company. That comes from a Conservative Government. If anyone had said that 12 months ago, they would have been laughed at. That is how seriously the Government take the importance of the steel industry, and that is what we are prepared to do.

We know that there is a bright future for the UK steel industry. Just look at what has happened in the past few months. Not only has Liberty House bought Tata’s Scottish plate mills at Dalzell and Clydebridge—I was delighted to be there when Tata literally handed the keys over to Liberty—but it has also brought most of the Caparo assets out of administration. We think that that might have saved up to 1,000 jobs. The continuing sale to Greybull of Tata’s long products division based in Scunthorpe is further evidence that the industry has a viable future.

The Government are committed to the record infrastructure investment programme. That is only possible because we continue to take the difficult decisions to keep the economy strong. HS2, Crossrail, the new aircraft carriers and the unprecedented procurement rule changes for publicly funded projects that we have made in recent months mean that the United Kingdom’s steel industry can compete and will win major public contracts.

I very much agree with the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). I was very pleased to visit the outstanding Celsa steel plant based in his constituency just a few months after my appointment last year. He levelled criticism at the SNP in Scotland and the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier). It really is not on. If I said, “Go and check out a website,” I would rightly be derided by Opposition Members, and properly so. The Scottish Government have to put their money where their mouth is and change the procurement rules. They have to copy and learn from what the United Kingdom Government have done and ensure that that steel in Aberdeen is going to British plants. There are no excuses now for that not happening. I am very proud of what we do.

Mr Betts: Something else that the Government can do is deal with the problem of energy costs for the UK industry. They are 85% higher than the costs for the German industry. Is the Minister going to act on that?

Anna Soubry: We have acted. Not only have we now got the compensation package up and running—we are paying out tens of millions of pounds—but from 2017 energy intensive industries will find themselves exempt.
Mr Betts: Eighty five per cent higher!

Anna Soubry: The hon. Gentleman can keep on shouting, and I will start to fall out with him. I am happy to say that I will be visiting his constituency and the steelworks there. As he knows, he will get an invitation, just as everyone always does. In Sheffield, we have good examples of outstanding steel makers and ability. Some 50,000 tonnes of Celsa’s UK steel has been used in Crossrail—the biggest construction project in Europe, built almost exclusively using British steel. Some 95,000 tonnes of British steel was used in the construction of the new Elizabeth aircraft carriers, and Network Rail sources 98% of its steel rail from the United Kingdom—as we all know, it comes mainly from Scunthorpe.

On the point about Ajax, a large part of that steel was unfortunately not made in this country. The remainder was certainly going through a UK buyer. There is of course more that we could do, but we are mapping out indicative quantities of steel for key projects in the infrastructure and Government construction pipelines, including HS2, new nuclear and offshore wind. One piece of work that I am determined to carry on doing relates to fracking. There is a huge job that can have huge benefits for our steel industry. I will speak bluntly: we have to get on with fracking. I met representatives of that industry only recently. We know that fracking could have real benefits for our steel industry. It was a great joy and pleasure to go to the plant in Hartlepool, which also has excellent unions, good management and an outstanding workforce and is hugely important for that community. They make an outstanding product. They do not make the seamless pipes that have to be used for fracking, but I do not see why we cannot look at making their pipes absolutely compliant so that they can be used.

I had another great visit going up to Rotherham to meet Members who represent the steelworks there. It also has an excellent workforce, outstanding unions and good management with a credible plan and a long-term future. I am proud, as we all should be, of the fact that one third of all landing gear apparently has a component made in Stocksbridge. I was also told that every aeroplane in the world has at least one component made from steel from Stocksbridge.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): And Rotherham.

Anna Soubry: Of course. It is important to say that it is Rotherham and Stocksbridge steelworks. Those are just some of the examples of our outstanding and world-leading steel sector. We can talk about Rolls-Royce engines and Formula 1 cars. Tata Steel has supplied more than half a million tonnes of strip steel to leading companies in the UK’s auto sector, including BMW, Mini, Jaguar Land Rover, Vauxhall and many others.

Unfortunately, the clock is against me, and I have not addressed all the points that the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland made. I know that he wants to talk to me about the Materials Processing Institute, which officials visited yesterday, and I think we are making real movement there. Mrs Moon, forgive me; I have not been able to deal with all the excellent points and speeches that have been made. The hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) makes good points about research. She knows that we continue to talk on that. I cannot say much more about the process with Tata, but we take all those points, and we work unstintingly. I pay credit to the Secretary of State and the officials for the work they are doing to secure a viable future for our outstanding steel industry.

3.59 pm

Tom Blenkinsop: In winding up, I would like to say that the critical point about Tata being the eighth player remains fundamental. We still want to know what Tory MEPs will do tomorrow in relation to the market economy status vote. We need to see a legislative framework going from paper to actual action in terms of policy and an industrial strategy. The Government do have an industrial strategy, but we have to bear it in mind that in the past 12 months we have only seen action and promises made as a result of the tragedy at Redcar and a Prime Minister faced by Welsh elections and the European referendum.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
I beg to move, 4 pm

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the control and monitoring of building regulations.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe, for what I think is the first time you have presided over one of my speeches in Westminster Hall. I am pleased to have this opportunity to highlight what I believe to be the inadequacy of the current system of building regulation.

This debate comes at an opportune time because the Government are currently prioritising house building and pushing for more affordable homes to be built, which is a good thing. Nevertheless, I am concerned that, without a proper building regulation system, an admirable commitment to build more homes will have the unintended consequence of compromising the quality of those homes. Building regulation inspections are increasingly being undertaken not by local government inspectors, as in the past, but by approved inspectors employed by private building services contractors. The problem is that all too often those approved inspectors are not monitored to ensure that they undertake sufficient checks and are not accountable to anybody when something goes wrong.

To highlight the problem, I shall relate an example of how the existing building regulations system failed properly to monitor a builder to such an extent that it put at risk the health of homeowners. In my constituency there is a row of houses that was built between 2007 and 2011. A couple of years ago I received a complaint from one of the residents, who alleged that his drinking water had been contaminated with sewage. When I investigated, I discovered that the local water company had no knowledge whatever of the houses, which were a later addition to a larger development where no problems had been recorded. It is worth noting that the houses in question were never registered with the Land Registry, which caused another problem I had to sort out—but that is a story for another day.

It seemed that the water company had never supplied drinking water to the row of houses or cleared the waste water system that had been installed. It turned out that the drinking water supply to the houses was linked to another house in the original development, and that house was supplied by the water company. The builder paid the very large bills run up by the house, which he apparently owned, and in turn billed the new houses, none of which had a water meter. In addition, the builder had installed in the road a waste pumping station that was serviced by a fish-pond pump that regularly broke down, resulting in blockages. Mr McCabe, you simply could not make it up. On at least one occasion, when the tank was full the builder was seen pumping the sewage out on to the railway line next to the development. The water company for our area and the National House Building Council are now in the process of designing a proper waste system for the homes, which have all suffered from waste water leaking into their foundations, leading to smells and, in some houses, rats.

During my investigation, I also discovered several other building defects in some of the homes, including dangerous gas pipework that had been installed by the builder without contacting a gas supplier. I immediately raised the matter with my local authority, Swale Borough Council, which explained that the building regulation inspections had been undertaken not by the council but by a private building services company. The council insisted that it had no authority or responsibility to monitor inspection work undertaken by a private company, although it would be more than happy to take on such a responsibility.

When I contacted the private building services company, it was very helpful. The company insisted that its inspections were in accordance with the building control performance standards issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government, and I am sure that they were. The guidance requires an approved inspector to determine a risk-based inspection regime, but accepts that it is not practicable to inspect all items of work relating to the building regulations.

The company said:

“Given powers to force independent building control inspectors to ensure that there is proper compliance with building regulations.”

I have to say that at that meeting it soon became apparent that there was no appetite to beef up the regulatory system.

Allowing builders to police themselves is probably fine in theory, particularly when we are talking about responsible builders, but it is certainly not satisfactory in practice when dealing with people like this particular builder—to call him a cowboy would be to insult Roy Rogers and the Lone Ranger. One of the affected residents had so many problems with her house that I eventually persuaded the NHBC to pay for her to have a structural survey. That report makes frightening reading.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He is right that we are not experts and so rely on an independent approved inspector to ensure that building regulations are adhered to. Does he share my concern that, although approved inspectors are regulated by the Construction Industry Council, not one of them has ever been struck off regarding the quality or professionalism of their work?

Gordon Henderson: I agree that it is about accountability. I will come on to that issue, so I am pleased that my right hon. Friend raised it.

As I said, the report makes frightening reading. I shall read out just five of the 27 findings listed in the survey:

“Finding No 1: Generally: The property was found to be constructed to a very poor standard. We found numerous breaches of Building Regulations that would have been in place at the time
the property was constructed. We have serious concerns over significant elements within the building that, if left without further attention, may pose health and safety risks to occupiers and users of the building.”

Finding No. 6 states:

“Structure/Floor: The beam and block floor within the garage has not been designed to meet the minimum loading requirements. This has subsequently resulted in its collapse. Exposed beams within the garage did not appear to have the minimum bearing on the supporting structure.”

My fear on reading that finding is that the rest of the ground-floor beams have been constructed in the same way.

Finding No. 7 reads:

“Structure/Upper Floors: Deflection and bouncing of the floorboards was noted to the upper timber floors. Movement of the floors has caused spot lights to fall from the ceiling.”

Finding No. 20 is on drainage:

“The mains foul sewer and drainage system serving the property do not discharge to a suitable drainage system in accordance with Approved Document H: Drainage and Waste Disposal.”

And finding No. 23, on lighting and electricals, states:

“Internal lights work intermittently suggesting that there may be issues with the electrical wiring and supply.”

Those are just a few of the damning condemnations. It is scandalous that any builder should be able to get away with such dangerous work. However, it is even more scandalous that nobody appears able to do anything to bring the builder to book. The local authority, the approved inspector and NHBC can do nothing, and it appears that the Department for Communities and Local Government can do nothing, too.

It would be bad enough if this case were the sole example of the lack of accountability in the construction industry, but unfortunately I have other examples of homeowners who have been unable to receive redress for poor quality work by builders, some of which are large national housing development companies. Let me give one example. In my constituency, there are a number of 12-flat residential buildings, in which the heating and hot water supply to the flats is supplied by just two domestic boilers. I am no heating engineer, but even I can see that such a system cannot cope with the demand, particularly in the winter, so it is hardly surprising that over the past couple of winters I have received regular complaints from tenants in the flats about a lack of heating and hot water. I arranged for a local heating company to investigate those complaints on my behalf.

It said in its report:

“All boiler rooms throughout the estate have the same problem. Most boiler room faults are caused by leaks in the copper pipework, the leaks become worse, soak electrical components and the system fails. Boiler room 5 has had ongoing issues with lack of hot water temperature. There is a constant flow of water being drawn through the cylinder and the recovery is not quick enough to maintain a constant temperature. All copper pipework throughout the estate appears to be substandard quality and has resulted in regular leaks.”

I eventually contacted the plumbing company that worked on the original system. It said in its response that it did not design the system, but it made this very interesting comment:

“It was evident on completion that the system design was flawed and we raised this continually with the developer.”

I took up the matter with the developer, who refused to accept responsibility and insisted that the system was adequate when it was installed and that the problem was a maintenance issue. They advised me to contact the property management company, which I subsequently did. That company eventually hired the local heating company, which had produced the report—whenever it is called out to a breakdown, it tries to patch up the system as best it can in the circumstances.

That heating system is still not working properly and does not provide sufficient hot water to all the residents. The whole system needs replacing, but the costs of undertaking such a major exercise would have to be met by the current tenants, because their lease states that they have to fund work undertaken by the property management company. Because the developer refuses to accept responsibility for what was patently a design fault during the original construction phase, they are getting away scot-free. That cannot be right. Sadly, that is not an isolated incident, as my mailbag can testify. Once again, there appears to be no accountability and nobody, except me, to whom the affected residents can turn for help, but I am limited to hitting my head against a brick wall of indifference.

I would like to talk about which regulations are actually enforced. Currently, the building regs require buildings to have a range of measures that are deemed necessary to make houses more energy-efficient or healthier for the residents. For instance, they require that all new buildings have extractor fans in bathrooms and kitchens, are properly insulated and have smoke alarms, but they do not require developers to install building alarms or burglar-proof windows and doors to a standard approved by the local police. That seems very short-sighted. It highlights the fact that current building regulations are simply out of date.

The truth is that the system is simply not working, not least because those charged with regulating building work are not themselves regulated. The time has come to undertake a review of how the building regs are monitored and enforced. My own preference is for local authorities to be given the ultimate responsibility for taking enforcement action against builders who do not comply with regulations and the approved inspectors who are supposed to ensure they are compliant.

I am, by nature, somebody who believes that we British are over-regulated, but in this instance I believe that better regulation is needed. A house is the most expensive purchase that most people make, and they have a right to expect value for their money. Too often, they do not get it.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (James Wharton): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) on securing this important debate on an issue that affects a great number of our constituents.

On the whole, the system of building regulations in this country—the system by which the work that builders do is monitored—is of a good standard, but that does not mean that it does not go wrong at times. I recognise my hon. Friend’s concerns, particularly given the terrible situation that he set out and the difficulties that his
[James Wharton]

constituent faced as a result of it. I do not want to comment too much on the detail of that case, simply because I do not sufficiently know the background. He referred to the specific to comment on the general, and I will therefore address the general—the overall system—in my comments.

It is appropriate that I first talk about the system that is in place for redress when people find that the properties they have purchased are not up to the standard that they expected. We recommend that such a person first complains to the person who carried out the work—the builder or the developer—and makes known to them their concerns about the work that they believe to be inadequate. Most responsible builders and developers will put right work that is not to the expected standard.

Should that not work, the next level of complaint is to the warranty provider if a new home warranty is in place. There are many different providers—NHBC, which my hon. Friend mentioned, is one of the largest—and they do a good job of ensuring that the standards that people rightly expect when they buy and move into a home are met, and that the system enables them to raise concerns about work that has been done. The consumer code for home builders provides protection if a home was built by a home builder that is registered with one of the supporting warranty bodies, such as NHBC, on or after 1 April 2010.

Should a constituent not find acceptable redress through those routes, there is the option to bring a civil claim against the builder in the civil courts and to pursue appropriate redress through the legal process. I have received a number of complaints about the process by which building control is carried out, but they are not focused only on approved inspectors. Local authorities, just like any other organisation, will not necessarily get building control right every single time. The reality is that the processes and the system that is in place allow these issues to be addressed at an earlier stage. I have set out some of the options that exist to enable redress to be found and problems to be rectified.

There are isolated cases—my hon. Friend spoke of one in his constituency—in which the impact is significant, but for some reason the system has not found a way to bring redress to correct the problems. I do not know whether civil action has been considered in that case, but that is the ultimate fall-back option for those affected by poor-quality building work—work that does not meet the standards that it should.

Gordon Henderson: I accept what the Minister is saying, but the biggest problem that people have is cowboy builders. The people who bought that particular property had no recourse to the courts because the builder maintained that he was subcontracted to another builder, who had subsequently gone out of business and had disappeared back to Europe. That is one of the problems that residents face today.

James Wharton: At the risk of giving legal advice to the constituent in question on the basis of my hon. Friend’s explanation, helpful though it is—I do not want to stray into the specific legal position—when somebody buys something with a certain expectation, there is always the option of looking at whether a legal redress is the right course of action.

We also monitor and regulate the work that approved inspectors do. At the heart of my hon. Friend’s concern, or at least one part of it, is the way the approved inspectors system regime is working for our constituents. The Construction Industry Council Approved Inspectors Register is the approval body for approved inspectors, and it has reviewed its activities. One of its recommendations was that there be periodic audits of approved inspectors to ensure that they are doing the work that we expect them to do, to the standard that we expect them to do it. CICAIR started carrying out audits last year to pick up issues with particular approved inspectors—hopefully, before complaints are raised. The Building Control Performance Standards Advisory Group has also strengthened the standards that apply to both types of building control bodies—local authorities and approved inspectors—to give better targeting of building control work.

The role of building control can only ever be as a spot-checking service. The issuing of a building regulations compliance certificate at the completion of work is not a complete guarantee of compliance throughout the process; it is only a spot check that seeks to hold developers and builders to account and to ensure that the standards that we expect are applied.

Mrs Miller: I thank the Minister for his thoughtful response. As he has already agreed, an important way to make the inspection regime more transparent would be to make the approved inspector’s report available to people who are buying a new home. I would be grateful if the Minister would update the House on his progress in putting a new system in place.

James Wharton: I put on record my appreciation of the work my right hon. Friend has done in this area. She has been a powerful and effective advocate on behalf of her constituents when they have run into such problems. Indeed, in an Adjournment debate much earlier in this Session, we discussed some of the things that she wants to be done.

One of the ideas discussed was to modify the system to allow greater transparency of the process by which approved inspectors ultimately sign off work. Only the other week, I had a meeting with representatives of CICAIR to discuss initial proposals. It is something I intend to take forward, appropriately, to ensure that the system continues to work, while adding layers of transparency in line with my right hon. Friend’s desires and her comments in the House during that debate.

I will be happy to write to my right hon. Friend with details of exactly where we are in that process, but I assure her that I have heard, loud and clear, the concerns that she has expressed—in particular during the earlier debate—and I intend to act on them and find a way to deliver the transparency that she and her constituents are looking for. There are some complexities within that; I want to ensure that it is done in co-operation with industry and in a way that people across the field support, but I think it will be welcome and I intend to deliver it. I will write to my right hon. Friend to ensure that she is fully updated on where we are in pursuing that process.

If an approved inspector does not take all reasonable steps, a complaint may be raised with the regulatory body, CICAIR. It will investigate whether an approved
inspector has acted negligently or in breach of contract. It is also possible to make a claim against an approved inspector in the civil courts—that is another route by which redress may be sought—if they have not acted in accordance with the regulations or as they should, to give homeowners reassurance, and to give developers and builders reassurance that they are complying with the appropriate regulations.

Approved inspectors are, of course, insured. That should not be necessary and we hope that jobs are done properly, and we should not put unreasonable expectations on the process—as I said, it is a spot check, not a complete guarantee—but there is the option of civil recourse if people feel it to be appropriate. That is not advice, but it might be the right thing for them to do.

**Gordon Henderson:** We have been talking about how we can better regulate approved inspectors and bring them to book, but how, and where, is anybody able to bring a builder to book? There is no such recourse or mechanism. The builder whom we have talked about in the debate is still building houses. He has been struck off the NHBC list of approved builders, but he has probably signed up somewhere else. If that happened in any other walk of life, he would be in court, charged with a criminal offence, and be put in prison—and he is not.

**James Wharton:** I had anticipated my hon. Friend’s concern, and I am about to talk about some of the ways in which accountability can be enforced, against not only the approved inspector but the builder, if they are in breach of our expectations.

Section 35 of the Building Act 1984 allows a local authority to bring a prosecution in the magistrates court for a breach of the building regulations. Prosecutions must be brought within two years of the date of completion of the building work and—I accept this is an area on which my hon. Friend might wish to have further discussion—approved inspectors have no powers to bring a prosecution. Further, section 48 of the Building Act prohibits a local authority from bringing a prosecution. Further, section 48 of the Building Act prohibits a local authority from bringing a prosecution.

Where approved inspectors identify concerns that are not addressed, however—where they are not satisfied that the builder is doing what should be done—they may in effect step back from compliance; they may cancel the initial notice; and the local authority may then, if appropriate, step in to take the action of which I have spoken. We do not have centrally kept statistics on the number of prosecutions, or their outcome, or on how many prosecutions take place for reverted work from approved inspectors, but a regime is in place to ensure that local authorities can take action.

The constituency case to which my hon. Friend referred is a particularly extreme and complex one. On the level of the problems, I was especially struck by the comment that the properties were not registered with the Land Registry, which seemed odd to me. I do not know by what process people could then purchase or occupy them. Concerns in the specific, however, may not necessarily or uniformly apply in general.

**Gordon Henderson:** I am grateful to the Minister for allowing me to intervene again. Not only were the properties not registered with the Land Registry, but one of the homeowners who approached me said that she had spent £10,000 doing her house up only to discover that she owned not that house but a house three doors down. Given that there was nothing with the Land Registry, it took my help to get things sorted out. That was the problem that I was talking about earlier. It is a total scandal, and the builder responsible is still out there working.

**James Wharton:** The specific case seems to be an extraordinary one. Of course, homebuyers would normally employ a solicitor of their own, whom we would expect to carry out inquiries in that area. Again without commenting on specific circumstances, given the limited information available, some of my hon. Friend’s constituents may find recourse in looking at the process by which they acquired the homes, as well as the process by which the homes were built.

Clearly, the problems my hon. Friend discussed are specific and serious. I am well aware from his comments, and long-running contributions even before this debate, that he has concerns about the area. I also recognise and have commented on the contribution made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). She has been an effective advocate for her constituents.

I do not want to give the wrong impression of the role of approved inspectors, or whom they owe a duty to. They are doing a spot check, not providing a complete guarantee. They should and must act professionally; where appropriate, they are audited and regulated to that end. They have insurance to ensure that if anything goes wrong protection is in place for those who may be affected. We are looking at how we can increase transparency, following the powerful comments and the advocacy of my right hon. Friend, given her concerns about constituents.

I will continue to look at the way in which the process works. I am happy to continue to have discussions to that end with my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey, who introduced the debate, but I cannot pretend that we will change the entire nature of the system. On the whole, it works well, it delivers the appropriate standards and most homes in this country are built to an extraordinarily good standard, by international comparisons. We should be proud of the system we have and of the people who work in and contribute to it, day in, day out. That does not mean that there will never be problems; where there are, we want to find ways to address them. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend to ensure that we do that in the appropriate way, in the appropriate time.

**Question put and agreed to.**
Northern Ireland Economy

4.29 pm

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I beg to move, That this House has considered the Northern Ireland economy.

It is good to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr McCabe. This is a timely debate, with Northern Ireland having just had elections to the Assembly, and it would be remiss of me not to mention—or, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) said, to gloat about—the success our party has had. May I pass on my congratulations to Mrs Arlene Foster, our party leader? I hope by tomorrow she will be the new First Minister for the next five years in Northern Ireland. That is the last bit of party politics I will bring into the debate, in case you chastise me, Mr McCabe, or I get some dirty looks from the Social Democratic and Labour party.

This will be a pleasant, humorous and serious debate and none of us will mention Brexit and all such things. Arlene Foster has gained huge respect across the whole of Northern Ireland, with more than 200,000 people having voted for her leadership and for our party. We look forward to the next five years. Two weeks have been allowed for us to get a programme for government in place, but hopefully it will not take that long and we will get up for business and deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. I pay tribute to my many colleagues who did not stand for re-election but contributed to the Assembly for many years and worked for the people of Northern Ireland.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): The hon. Gentleman is very kind to allow me to intervene so early. As he has mentioned the programme for government and his party leader, may I urge all of those who will be designated as Ministers that they must give top priority to funding for our schools right across Northern Ireland? A number of constituents have raised with me what is something of a funding crisis in schools, so I would like him to assure us that that will be given priority.

David Simpson: I will give the hon. Lady the best assurances that I can. I am not a Member of the Assembly, but that message has been made clear and she has put that on the record, so it will be taken back. She is right that education is an important aspect for the future generations in Northern Ireland.

We are all well aware of the difficult times that Northern Ireland has faced. We are the smallest of the four regions and, as I have already alluded to, we are still suffering from the results of the troubles, which have been a debilitating factor in the economy’s growth. That has made inward investment slightly more difficult and for the local business sector—small, medium and large businesses—sustainability has continued to be an uphill struggle. My speech contains good news for Northern Ireland, but it will also be realistic about lessons we have to learn, what we can do better and how the Assembly can move forward in the future.

At the outset, I want to praise all the companies who provide employment in Northern Ireland. I recognise the determination and energy they put in every day, along with their workforces. Their resolve has sent unemployment rates in Northern Ireland to an all-time low. When the economic crisis hit the whole of the United Kingdom, in my constituency we were at 8.5% unemployment, but as of last week that figure has come down to 4.1%. Even at the best of times the figures never fell below that, so we are encouraged by that. I have no doubt that the selfless work and processes established by companies right across Northern Ireland will continue for many years to come.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the main sources of employment in his constituency is manufacturing industry? Despite all the nonsense that has been spoken about the uncertainty for manufacturers because of the EU referendum, and the prospect of the people of the United Kingdom voting to leave the EU and break its shackles of dominance on our economy, manufacturing industry has actually forged ahead.

David Simpson: I wondered how long it would be before someone brought up Brexit.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): A source close to you.

David Simpson: A source very close to me, yes. My hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim is right: despite all the nonsense that has been talked, the manufacturing sector certainly will continue if we leave the European Union.

According to reports this week, Northern Ireland’s growth is dependent on the retail and service sectors, as they “continue to report the fastest rates of job creation.” I have certainly witnessed that in each of the three towns in my constituency. Growth is slow, but small retail businesses—I am not referring to charity shops—are starting to move back on to the high street, which is a good thing.

We may be the smallest region in the UK, but we are powerful on the world stage. Some 30% of the famous London red buses are manufactured in Ballymena by a local firm, Wrightbus. That is of course a big contract in London.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It supports Brexit as well.

David Simpson: We will move on from Brexit a wee bit; we will come to it later.

Some 25% of all computer read-write heads are made by Seagate Technology in Londonderry, at the UK’s largest nanotechnology site, and 40% of the world’s mobile crushing equipment is made in Northern Ireland. We have some of the largest pharmaceutical companies, which employ thousands of people across the Province.

It is evident that the people of Northern Ireland remain committed to helping to grow its economy. However, despite all the good news, we cannot ignore the significant job losses that have been reported by companies—two of the most high profile are Michelin and ITI, and some others face making redundancies, because of problems in the global market and sometimes because of energy costs.
Sammy Wilson: I am glad that my hon. Friend has mentioned energy costs. Does he agree that the cost of energy is one of the biggest threats to manufacturing in Northern Ireland, as it has been in England, Scotland and Wales, and that that is in part due to the insane policy of trying to move towards renewable energy when we have cheap forms of energy in coal, gas and oil?

David Simpson: Absolutely. I thought my hon. Friend was going to mention the EU again; he disappointed me greatly in not getting it slipped in. He is right: we need to look at other ways we can help. Some companies across Northern Ireland, certainly in my constituency, have availed themselves of gas lines, which have made a big difference to electricity costs, especially for bakeries. As the Executive move forward, I believe we have a big part to play in reshaping energy policy.

I meet companies regularly, as I am sure all right hon. and hon. Members here do. One of the major issues they raise continually is business rates—if it is not energy costs, it is business rates. In Northern Ireland, we have capped rates for manufacturing at 30%. I have to say that that is a success for my own party—other parties agreed to it, but it was brought forward by the Democratic Unionist party and we have achieved great things with it. Companies today are surviving because of it, and without it, those companies would not still be here.

My constituency of Upper Bann is the second largest manufacturing base in Northern Ireland outside Belfast. For every manufacturing job in the Province, 1.5 jobs are supported elsewhere in the economy, contributing £2 billion in wages to staff and a further £2.2 billion, though jobs supported outside the sector. I fear future losses if we do not address the issue of energy costs, which I keep coming back to, because it is crippling a lot of our companies.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Ben Wallace): Will the hon. Gentleman join me in pressing the new Executive to ensure that one of the first things they do is resolve the issue of providing a proper and appropriate superconductor between the Republic of Ireland and the north? It is widely believed, and stated to me by the energy companies, that Northern Ireland’s manufacturers and residents have higher energy costs than their neighbours in the Republic because of the lack of a modern, 21st-century superconductor process to allow electricity to move around the whole country and island.

David Simpson: I am grateful to the Minister for intervening. He is absolutely correct, but that project has been held back by environmentalists—I do not want to get on the hobby-horse of my hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim—and, I have to say, by Sinn Féin, as far as planning permission is concerned. We need to address that. The Minister is quite right that that will make a big difference to energy costs. I think Northern Ireland has the second most expensive electricity after Japan, and addressing that would help the economy to grow even more.

Despite the difficult times we have had, 40,000 new jobs were created in the past five years. A lot of that, of course, was done through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Mrs Arlene Foster was the Minister in the Department at that stage, so she has a good track record, along with her colleagues in the Executive. We also welcomed £2.9 billion of investment in that time, which is almost three times the £1 billion target. We are well on the way.

We look forward to the reduction of corporation tax. Our party is focused on that and has promised its delivery. Is it a silver bullet? No, but it is certainly part of a large armament that will be available to the Executive. It is estimated that 30,000 jobs could be created through the reduction in corporation tax, which would mean 10% growth in our economy. Our party and the First Minister will certainly be pushing for that. The Northern Ireland Assembly today is in a good position to maximise the potential of all those things, but we need the Government’s support behind us.

Tom Hall, the vice-president of international technology and operations at Allstate, has said:

“Our experience in Northern Ireland far exceeded our expectations. We came here originally for the cost savings. We find ourselves staying for the people and the talent that is available.”

That leads me on to a key factor relating to Northern Ireland’s economy—one that I am proud we are delivering. Northern Ireland is the top region in the UK for educational attainment. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) raised the issue of education, which we need to make more progress on. We cannot rest on our laurels. However, the official figures show that in 2015, 83% of Northern Ireland students achieved the top grades in A-level exams, compared with 77.3% across the rest of the UK. Students and young people play a pivotal role in the Northern Ireland economy. Their input is not given enough focus, and the skills and expertise they are achieving needs to be given the accreditation it deserves.

Northern Ireland is the only region of the UK that has increased salaries for new jobs in the past year. However, new salaries in Northern Ireland remain lower than the UK average of £33,815, so there is still some work to be done. We need to stop haemorrhaging our trained professionals to other countries, which can offer better rates of pay. It is a vicious circle that we are in: while better pay is available in other countries, it encourages our young people to go to them and perhaps not return—if they are going for educational purposes or to learn skills or whatever and returning, that would be a different story. We need to improve our rates. The only way we can do that is to encourage the private sector to invest in Northern Ireland and to reduce the public sector. That is something that we are trying to achieve, and it has been achieved to an extent, but again there is still some way to go.

As I said earlier, our manufacturing sector was certainly one of the worst hit, but the 30% cap on manufacturing rates has made a big difference. The latest figures show that companies may now be prepared to pay for new recruits and to invest in new staff. That may go some way to encouraging young people to embark upon apprenticeships, especially plumbers, electricians, bricklayers and other such areas in the construction sector. There remains a concerning lack of skilled tradesmen throughout Northern Ireland. Last year it was reported that the construction industry was paying grossly over the odds, as they had to bring recruits in from other countries to ensure that they met their completion dates.
Sammy Wilson: Does my hon. Friend agree that that is one of the reasons why it is important that Northern Ireland, like other regions of the United Kingdom, gets its fair share of the money raised through the apprenticeship levy? That is an issue that needs to be addressed by the Treasury and also the Northern Ireland Executive.

David Simpson: My hon. Friend is correct. We need to get our fair share of that in order to push this forward. I recently visited my local training centre in the Craigavon area. I have visited it many times, and in recent times it hosted a regional skills competition. I spoke to one of the instructors there, who told me of one young man who came to him—I think it was three years ago—as a trainee plumber. The instructor knew when he saw the young man working that he had something special. That young fellow lives in a village called Katesbridge outside Banbridge.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): That is in my constituency.

David Simpson: He is in his early 20s, and is a constituent of the hon. Lady, and he is the world champion plumber. He went through all the heats, he went to Brazil, he won the heats in Brazil, and he is now the world champion plumber. That is some achievement for a young lad from Katesbridge in—I emphasise this again—the hon. Lady’s constituency. For a young man like that who has come in and developed a skill, the world is his oyster. He can do whatever he likes and demand his price. That is what we want to see: more young people getting into those skills, including the basic skills. It has to be realised that, while parents want all their children to be Einsteins, brain surgeons, dentists, GPs and so on, that is not going to happen, but there is still a lot of money to be earned with those skills, which we lost during the economic crisis.

Lastly, I want to focus on the agri-food sector. I have come from the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs just now, and we had a very interesting debate. This sector plays a significant role in the Northern Ireland economy. It contributes £1 billion of added value per annum and has demonstrated a strong track record of export growth, employing over 100,000 people, and Rural Affairs just now, and we had a very interesting debate. Does he agree that a large proportion of Northern Ireland’s agri-food industry is dependent on exports? In that respect, it is important that we achieve a direct export capacity to China, Taiwan and north America.

David Simpson: I absolutely agree—I think the hon. Lady raised the point in the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee previous to this debate—and that needs to be achieved quickly.

It is humbling to hear all the success stories—sometimes, there are stories of not so much success—especially coming from a wee country that was deep in conflict for many years. To me, that shows a strong work ethic from the Northern Ireland community and the business community to keep trying. Our economy is settling into a reasonable state of stability, but we must acknowledge the unease of local businesses, farmers and investors as the referendum looms.

I am appalled by some of the scare tactics that have been put forward by those in the remain campaign. Membership of the EU costs £350 million a week. Combined with red tape, bureaucracy and many EU laws taking precedence over UK law, we have reached a point at which the costs have outgrown the falling benefits.

Nine years ago, devolution was restored to Northern Ireland. In that time, we all faced many local, national and international challenges. We faced up to them and came through them. However, we cannot take our foot off the gas. The incoming First Minister’s five-point plan prioritised spending on the health service, creating more jobs and increased incomes, protecting family budgets, raising education standards for everyone and investing in infrastructure. That is what we are about and what we need to do to deliver for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Several hon. Members rose—

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): Order. I plan to start calling the Front-Bench speakers at about 10 past 5. I think that three hon. Members are standing. If you can take about five minutes each, we will be able to accommodate you.
4.55 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I am pleased to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I again congratulate the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) on securing the debate. Like him, I congratulate everyone who was elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly on Friday and Saturday of last week. There is a major job of work to do, and I am sure they will get down to that as part of their preliminary work tomorrow.

I will focus my contribution on the role that tourism and the visitor economy can play in bringing prosperity to Northern Ireland, but first I want to echo the comments of the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) about education. Clearly, education, skills and training are directly linked to the economy. However, on 23 March, schools received a letter from the Minister saying that their budget would be at a certain level. It is a major cut, which will have an impact on the delivery of the curriculum to many pupils throughout the schools sector. That will have an impact on our economy in the long term, which needs to be addressed as a priority.

Sammy Wilson rose—

Ms Ritchie: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that two other hon. Members wish to take part in the debate, but I give way to him.

Sammy Wilson: Will the hon. Lady accept that, given how the block grant works, the only way more money can be found for education is through reform of the education system in Northern Ireland? I am talking about holding less money at the centre for Department-inspired initiatives and instead giving it to principals, and about showing less favouritism to certain growing sectors of education at the expense of other sectors, some of which are already working under capacity.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I agree that there needs to be investment in schools and education. That is the priority, because investment in well-developed children’s education will lead to better outcomes for training and our economy.

Northern Ireland is undoubtedly a beautiful place, and our appeal has been strengthened by our growing position as a world-leading location for films and television. In that respect, tourism is an important revenue generator. That helps to support jobs and gives our communities new livelihoods.

As a co-chair of the all-party group for the visitor economy, I am anxious, as are many members of the group, for the Government to bring forward proposals to reduce VAT on tourism on a UK basis. That fiscal incentive would have a deep and generous impact on the Northern Ireland economy. We need only look at the south of Ireland, where VAT on tourism has been levied at 9% over the last number of years. As a consequence of that measure, about 9,000 jobs were created in the two years after it was introduced. We are part of the UK, which is one of only two of the 27 countries in the European Union that do not have a lower rate of VAT on tourism, so that immediately places us at a disadvantage.

The hon. Member for Upper Bann also raised the issue of Brexit. Obviously, I take a very different view from him and his colleagues in the Democratic Unionist party. I and my colleagues in the Social Democratic and Labour party believe that we should remain in the European Union and I give a little warning based on evidence direct from Danske Bank. This week, it said in the quarterly sectoral review for 2016 that the economic growth forecast for Northern Ireland had been revised down to 1.6% from 1.8%. Angela McGowan of Danske Bank was reported in the business press yesterday as having indicated that that was due to the threat of Brexit, austerity and slower global growth, which takes us back the global commodity markets. She said:

“The message remains that Northern Ireland’s economy continues to expand, but the pace of growth is slowing. While the continued reduction in the public sector jobs will weigh down overall growth in the short to medium term, by far the biggest risk to growth this year is Brexit which has lowered investment and growth in the first half of this year…but there is no reason the private side of the economy should not bounce back”

after the referendum, which I hope will produce a remain vote.

Those on the leave side have not produced any evidence on which to base their arguments, and they do not know what the far side of a leave vote would look like. However, I know that there will be a severe impact on our local economy. I firmly believe that there is a future for the Northern Ireland economy and for our young people, but that depends on several factors. One is staying in the European Union, otherwise we will close off one of our biggest areas of growth.

I once again congratulate the hon. Member for Upper Bann on securing this important debate. I hope that the Northern Ireland Executive will get down to work and ensure that new areas of growth can be tapped into and that new areas for visitors can be created. That can happen only in a context in which we are totally open for business and totally open to new markets. That means remaining in the European Union.

Further to that, I want our agri-food sector to grow—

Jim Shannon: Your five minutes have gone.

Ms Ritchie: Yes; I will conclude by thanking the hon. Member for Upper Bann for securing the debate, but I remind hon. Members that we are better inside the European Union than outside, and I ask the Minister to comment on the need to lower VAT on tourism.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Lady for her co-operation.

5.3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I understand that the Minister, the shadow Minister and the Scottish National party’s spokesperson must start to speak at 5.10 pm, but I wondered whether it would be possible to have a couple of extra minutes, Mr McCabe—there are two other Members left to speak.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Just crash on, Jim.
Jim Shannon: Okay. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) on his clear presentation of the case. May I say for the record, and for the record, that I am a member of the Ulster Farmers Union and have been for more than 30 years? I hear what the farmers in my area are saying—they want out. The individual opinion of the president of the Ulster Farmers Union is one thing, but the membership is very different.

The Northern Ireland economy is a far cry from what it once was, but there is still a lot of work to be done to rebalance the economy. Growth is faster than the UK average across almost all sectors of our economy, which is testimony to the continued hard work, confidence and stability of the Northern Ireland Executive. We must be clear where that growth is coming from. We have record levels of job creation and more jobs than ever before in our Province. We have record levels of inward investment and more multinational companies and private sector jobs than ever before. The economy in Northern Ireland is going well at the moment.

The longest sustained period of devolved Government in Northern Ireland since before our troubles has delivered for the people of Northern Ireland, and will continue to deliver with the mandate we achieved last week. After all we have been through, Ulster is no longer at a crossroads. We are on a clear path on the motorway to a better future. Last month, Ulster’s private sector added its 12th consecutive month of growth to Northern Ireland’s economic engine. The rates of growth in new orders, business activity and employment among indigenous Northern Ireland firms have bucked the trend and exceeded the UK average. The new Northern Ireland is literally working at the moment. By contrast, last month the UK private sector as a whole expanded at its weakest rate in three years, with both services and construction posting subdued rates of activity. The economic engine may be roaring in Northern Ireland, but a continued UK economic slowdown could prove an obstacle on our clear path to a better future.

The pace of job creation continues to accelerate in the Province, with all sectors increasing their staffing levels. Manufacturing’s seven consecutive months of job losses have come to a welcome end, and the Province’s manufacturing sector is defying UK norms. Export orders expanded at their fastest rate for 21 months, with Northern Ireland’s exports to non-EU countries now at a record high, showing that Northern Ireland can compete and thrive independently on the global stage just like the rest of the United Kingdom.

Northern Ireland has seen unemployment drop from almost 59,000 in 2011 to just over 39,000 in 2016. My hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann referred to the creation of some 40,000 jobs. The target was 25,000 jobs but we achieved 40,000, so it is good news again. He also referred to investment. We have had £585 million of research and development investment, almost double the target of £300 million, and 72% of new jobs are supported under the “Rebuilding our Economy” programme. Let us be clear about what is happening—there is almost an economic miracle in Northern Ireland at the present time.

The Northern Ireland Executive, led by the DUP and in partnership with industry, has delivered real advances. The ending of air passenger duty on long-haul flights was a DUP initiative, and we have had over 1 million more visitors in the past three years, with some £752 million spent by them in 2014. Cruise ships docking in Northern Ireland brought 145,000 guests in 2016. Again, those are great things.

The DUP has also continued the policy of industrial derating, which has protected jobs and encouraged investment. We have protected the small business rates relief scheme, which has benefited small businesses across Northern Ireland by approximately £18 million a year. We have delivered a Northern Ireland-wide rating revaluation, resulting in reduced bills for businesses, and 525 new business have benefited from the introduction of the empty premises rate relief.

We had a meeting today on broadband, which is an issue in my constituency and those of other Members. Broadband is not the Minister’s responsibility, but let us put a marker down right now—we need help and investment to make it happen so that we can move forward.

As I said, Ulster is no longer at the crossroads. We are on a path to a better future, with a clear mandate to go forth and continue to deliver and with First Minister Arlene Foster providing the turbo to reach the even better days ahead.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) for securing the debate and for acknowledging the role of the real job creators—people who start businesses and take them forward, sometimes through difficult challenges. They create new products or find new applications for products; they find new markets and new customers. That is what creates new jobs, before all of us in politics claim the credit for that. What we have to do is make sure that we give these people the best possible environment in which to do that.

The hon. Gentleman quoted Tom Hall of Allstate. I recall signing up Allstate for investment in Northern Ireland along with Mo Mowlam and the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) as far back as 1998. We told Allstate that it would be impressed by the people, the talent and the skills in Northern Ireland, and that it would invest further. I asked it to promise that it would not keep the second wave of investment in Belfast but would come to the north-west instead, and so it did.

Listening to the hon. Members for Upper Bann and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), it would have been easy to be lulled into a culture of contentment with all this talk of economic miracles and the economy going well, or, as the Deputy First Minister put it a few weeks ago, the economy being in a “happy place”. The reality is that in my constituency the jobseeker’s allowance claimant rate in three years, with both services and construction posting subdued rates of activity. The economic engine may be roaring in Northern Ireland, but a continued UK economic slowdown could prove an obstacle on our clear path to a better future.

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The Northern Ireland Executive, led by the DUP and in partnership with industry, has delivered real advances. The ending of air passenger duty on long-haul flights was a DUP initiative, and we have had over 1 million
I have limited time, but will the Minister tell us about some of the opportunities for the next Assembly to work with the UK Government on city deals and enterprise zones? Those opportunities were available to us throughout the whole of the last Parliament, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer said that he would give Northern Ireland enterprise zones and city deals if he got proposals from the Executive, but proposals came not until one finally came in 2014 for an enterprise zone in Coleraine. We still have no proposals for the areas that are most mired in high unemployment.

Will any prospective city deal include support for further university expansion? Why could there not be a cross-border dimension? We have made a move on corporation tax, but if we are to learn lessons from the south, we must see that it is not just corporation tax that has underpinned its economic performance. It is also key investment in higher education and skills and in infrastructure. Those two things are missing in the north. In fact, the Northern Ireland Executive have been going the wrong way on higher education, which is no criticism of the outgoing Minister for Employment and Learning, Stephen Farry, who has done a key job on skills and apprenticeships. I take fully on board the point that the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) made about the apprenticeship levy.

I do not expect an answer today, but will the Minister talk to colleagues here in Whitehall about whether, when we next sit down to serious negotiations about taking Northern Ireland forward economically, some of the money that the Irish Government are having to repay to the UK Government to cover the loan could be earmarked to support north-south funding mechanisms? It could also support British-Irish measures through the British-Irish Council, and it could be used to encourage much more co-operation between the devolved regions, the London Government and the south. Such an identifiable pool of money could be earmarked for some constructive and imaginative investments that would release all our energies and capacities, not only in Northern Ireland but throughout these islands.

5.12 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I will try to be uncharacteristically brief to assist those still to speak. I congratulate the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) on securing this timely and significant debate. It is entirely appropriate for the Labour party to associate itself with congratulations to Arlene Foster, who is soon to be First Minister, and the DUP for what I was going to call its crushing victory, but then I remembered that the hon. Gentleman referred to Northern Ireland as the centre of crushing equipment, and I did not want to make any read-across there.

I particularly thank the hon. Gentleman for educating the House, and not for the first time. In a long and not particularly distinguished parliamentary career, I have never, ever heard of the international world plumbing championships in Brazil. They were news to me. I am delighted that Katesbridge’s finest is now the world plumbing champion. I am not sure whether that links up to the Olympics and we will see relay rodding or synchronised soldering, or anything of that nature, but there is remarkable potential there and we should know more about it. That links to what the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) said about tourism: I think “Northern Ireland—home of the world plumbing champion” has a ring to it.

The comment about Fortnum & Mason resonated slightly with me, but perhaps in a different direction. I happen to think that Quails of Banbridge is vastly superior to Fortnum & Mason. In my opinion, Fortnum & Mason is merely the Quails of London—not the other way round. When I next find myself in the company of the hon. Member for Upper Bann, I trust he will introduce me to his friends in Quails and that the appropriate discount will be made available.

The hon. Gentleman rightly introduced the debate by saying that although there is some good news, there must be realism. That is absolutely the point. We had bad news with Bombardier, and then some good news with Bombardier in connection with the CS100 jets.
[Stephen Pound]

We have had some bad news in certain aspects but we have the continued triumph of Wrightbus and, in the field of skilled, high-quality engineering—ejector seats and various other areas—there is good news.

That good news has not, though, exactly reached the Assembly’s own research and information service, which described Northern Ireland as being “viewed as having a low growth, low productivity, and low wage economy.”

with the additional problem of high levels of economic inactivity. There appears to be a disconnect between the optimism of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—an optimism that I share—and many people’s perception. There is good news: we constantly refer to the proportion of public sector employment in Northern Ireland, and it is now down to around 27%. That has dropped considerably in the past few years. I do not lay that entirely at the feet of the Minister, but I am sure he will claim some responsibility.

The overarching point I want to make, which we heard made many times, is that made by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan): we cannot fool ourselves into a culture of contentment. All is not rosy. I have great admiration for the hon. Member for Strangford and I would love to have him speaking on behalf of my party. We would employ him in party election broadcasts every single day because his optimism, sunny spirits and marvellous skills at converting people are greatly prized—I have seen him in action in Ards—but it is not all good news.

The shadow that hangs over everything is, I am afraid, Brexit. I appreciate that today has been yet another skirmish in the battle of Brexit—we have inevitably moved in that direction—but we have to accept the fact that Northern Ireland’s economic performance is underpinned by EU funding. We have perhaps had too many stats in this debate, but between 2007 and 2013, EU money accounted for around 8.4% of Northern Ireland’s annual GDP. If we look at the Assembly Executive’s economic objectives, they have factored in £2 billion of EU funding since 2014 in the 2014-20 economic forecasts. If that money disappears, there is no guarantee whatever—I look to the Minister, but with little optimism in this particular case—that Westminster will plug that funding gap.

I pray in aid Dr Leslie Budd. I think some Members here were present when he gave evidence to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. He identified some major problems for the Northern Ireland economy in the case of what I personally consider would be a foolish gesture—namely, if we turned our backs on our European friends, trading partners and those with which we have so much in common. Those problems would include reduced cross-border trade, an impact on foreign direct investment and the loss of EU funding for development programmes.

The danger is that the slightly faltering but ultimately strengthening Northern Ireland economy could suffer a terrible blow in the event of Brexit. All of us who know and love Northern Ireland respect its incredible quality of invention and innovation. The number of patents that have come from Northern Ireland over the past 100 to 150 years is staggering. I am sure the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) could come up with a similar list from Scotland, but I challenge him to meet the degree of entrepreneurial spirit and achievement that we have seen in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland is a great country with immense potential. Let us not threaten it by thinking that turning our backs on Europe and taking a leap into the dark represents a step forward. It does not; it represents a step back. The hon. Member for Upper Bann has, as ever, done the House an excellent service. He has a distinguished reputation in business, being one of the few people who have come to this House with a background in creating business and paying wages, and he speaks with authority. On this occasion, I respect him but I disagree with him, and that is the position of my party.

5.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Ben Wallace): May I thank the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) for securing this debate? It is great that we are having a debate about Northern Ireland’s economy. I am delighted that his speech was much shorter than the Upper Bann count on Saturday night. I was waiting and waiting for the final results of the Northern Ireland Assembly elections, and, for some reason, Upper Bann managed to spin it out until almost the last possible moment.

I heard what the hon. Gentleman said. It is true that we have to do all we can to continue supporting very important parts of the Northern Ireland economy. I am delighted that it is moving in the right direction, with manufacturing at its heart. I am a north-west MP, and I see a lot of strong similarities between his part of the world and mine. While Bombardier has had some bad news, I am delighted by the order of more than 70 C series planes, which is a big order for any aeroplane manufacturer. There are 6,000 BAE Systems workers on my patch, and I know how that can secure their future for a long time. This Government are working to support Bombardier when called upon, to achieve more orders across the world for that very successful plane, and I hope we can do that.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of energy costs. It is true that UK energy firms can face, and have sometimes faced, higher energy costs compared with their competitors, but I would not lay it all at the door of environmental issues or, indeed, the European Union. Germany may, as it says, have lower business energy costs, but it has much higher wage and social costs. For example, there is little variation in steel prices across Europe because each country has different costs for its businesses.

I visited the Irish national electricity generation company down in Dublin a few months ago, and it is clear that the consumer in Northern Ireland, whether business or residential, could have lower energy prices if we just sorted out the superconductor crossing the border. It is in everyone’s interests—including all the parties in the Executive—to ensure that that happens and that we get on with it, because it is unfair to penalise Northern Ireland’s businesses for something that is within the Executive’s power to put right. I will do everything I can to help with that.
It is great that we have some real blue chip companies based in Northern Ireland. Thales is doing well, and I was delighted that 80 new jobs were announced this week in AXA over in Derry. That is all going in the right direction, but I understand that there are challenges. The agri-food industry is a big industry, and it is important that we recognise that it comprises not just the farm but the processor and the retailer. Some are doing very well out of it, some are not. On Monday night I met members of the farming community at Queen’s University Belfast, when Commissioner Hogan came over from the European Commission. It is true that we face some big challenges to ensure that our farmers have a profitable, stable and enduring future, and I think everyone has a role in that.

As for farming, it is absolutely clear that access to export markets, and growing exports for produce, is the No. 1 priority for the Government and for farmers. I will say this on Brexit: putting extra or new barriers in the way of growing export markets will not help farmers in the short or long term. Farmers in the north of Ireland need to sell their beef abroad, they need to sell their milk abroad and they need access to markets. If people say it is the EU that holds them back, they should look to the south, where the farmers in the Republic of Ireland have a better milk price than farmers in the north. That is mainly because the Republic of Ireland—little Ireland, on its own—has managed to open up bigger markets in China to sell its milk produce and remain within the EU. The challenge is not to put more barriers in front of our farmers if we want to see our agri-food sector increase; the challenge is to decrease the number of them. Wherever we see protectionism around the world, I believe the EU is better at trying to remove it than countries trying that alone.

The other point is stability—other hon. Members have mentioned it, so I will not dwell on it—and stability of governance in Northern Ireland. We saw that the last round of crisis, with Stormont effectively suspended, did not help with the message on the economy. All parties here know that the strongest message for business is stability, so it can plan and invest. The Northern Ireland Executive, which are back up and running, have a great opportunity to capitalise on that good message about potential. It is very important that, when business feels that the environment is not stable, people speak up for it and make sure that politicians hear that message. It is also true that stability is important here in Great Britain.

On education, it is tragic when we see the great, educated population of Northern Ireland not getting the jobs, or when the skills are not matched to them. That is something that we all have to work on across the UK and in Northern Ireland. That is why we were delighted, in the Stormont House agreement, to commit £500 million over 10 years towards shared and integrated education, to help funnel that and improve people’s educational chances across Northern Ireland.

The hon. Member for Upper Bann talked about the family budget. It is true that we need to do more to make sure that everyone in Northern Ireland, those on lower and higher incomes, go along together with any growth. That is why I am proud that this Government have managed to raise the personal allowance to £11,500 this year. No one will pay tax if they earn below that. The national living wage came in last month, which will see a real increase in people’s pockets across Northern Ireland for those on lower incomes. Also, the upper rate of tax now starts at £43,000. If we are going to encourage people to stay and invest in Northern Ireland and aspire to do things, why should they not keep some of that money as a reward as well? We do not want to drive away our entrepreneurs and penalise them for doing well. That is very important.

As a north-west MP, I know that the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) is absolutely right to say it is very important to make sure that our economic development is balanced across a region or a country. It is the same in Scotland. I used to represent North East Scotland, and there was a similar debate between Aberdeenshire, Glasgow and Edinburgh. We have to make sure that we always rebalance, and that we do so fully conscious that it is not always about one big city. I am delighted about the Republic of Ireland’s commitment on the A5—after this election, we hope. The Northern Ireland Executive have already said that they are going to move ahead with the A6 and finish off the dualling. If we can get Derry and Londonderry much faster to get to, there is great hope. I hear the hon. Gentleman loud and clear on the city deals and enterprise zones. I have already spoken to the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) about how we can help to lobby and put together a bid. We will happily go with her to see the Chancellor and lobby for that, whether it is for South Down or Londonderry.

With 30 seconds left, I finish by saying I come back to a Northern Ireland that is full of confidence and that is actually pretty united. In the Chamber today we heard nationalist and unionist parties agreeing how good a place Northern Ireland is, how attractive it is for investment and how the economy is going in the right direction. If the pride of the country can be mixed with stability—once the referendum is out of the way, we should all work for that—and with aspiration, I think Northern Ireland has the ingredients to make a cracking economy and to move forward.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Written Statement

Tuesday 3 May 2016

WORK AND PENSIONS

Universal Credit

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Stephen Crabb): I am pleased to inform the House that universal credit is now available in every Jobcentre across the country, having reached the final three Jobcentre Plus offices—Purley, Thornton Heath and Great Yarmouth—at the end of last month. This means universal credit is available for all new claims from single jobseekers wherever they are in Great Britain.

So far, over 450,000 people have made a claim to universal credit, with over 9,500 new claims made every week. The national roll-out means people in all parts of the country can now benefit from universal credit, which puts people at the heart of the welfare system for the first time.

As universal credit has rolled out, the positive difference it has made for those who claim it is clear. For example, those who are already receiving universal credit in comparison to a similar cohort receiving previous Jobseeker’s allowance, people on Universal Credit spend 50% more time looking for work, they are 8 percentage points more likely to have found work or to be in work and when they are in work, they are more likely to be earning more.

Universal credit makes it easier to start work and earn more because it:

Offers personalised support to progress in work

Under the old system, as soon as someone moved into work, they were on their own. But with universal credit they can still get support. For the first time ever, Jobcentre Plus work coaches continue to support claimants in work, helping people increase their hours, earn more and progress in their chosen career.

Mirrors the world of work

Like most jobs, universal credit is paid in a single monthly amount direct into people’s bank accounts, giving them control over their own money and making the move into work easier.

Helps with childcare costs

Under universal credit, working families can claim back up to 85% of their childcare costs each month. This can be claimed up to a month before starting a job so people can focus on getting ready for work and so their child can settle into a new routine. For families with two children this could be worth up to £13,000 a year.

Stays with people as they move into work

With universal credit, people’s claim remains open, even when they move into work. Unlike the old system, people can work as many hours as they want and take on short contracts without having to end their claim, helping to build up experience for a full time position.

Makes work pay

There are none of the cliff edges of the old system. As people’s earnings increase, their universal credit payments reduce at a steady rate, so they can be sure they will always be better off working and earning more.

With universal credit rolled out nationally, more people will now be able to take advantage of this support and the unique features of universal credit, which is making work pay and is sweeping away the complexities, traps, and confusions of the previous system. Our focus now is continuing its expansion to all claimants.

[HCWS709]
Written Statement

Written Statements

Wednesday 4 May 2016

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Housing and Planning Bill: Standing Order 83O
Assessment

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis): I am placing in the Library of the House today the Department’s analysis of the application of Standing Order No. 830 in respect of the Lords amendments to the Housing and Planning Bill.

[HCWS710]
Written Statements

Thursday 5 May 2016

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Pubs Regulation

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): The Government have worked hard to meet the challenging deadline laid down by the Small Business Enterprise and Employment Act 2015, and bring the pubs code into force by 26 May 2016.

Good progress has been made. The Government published draft regulations and a consultation in two parts on 29 October and 4 December 2015. The consultation closed on 18 January, and Government published a response document and laid regulations on 14 April 2016.

Since laying the pubs code regulations, we have identified a small number of technical drafting errors. It is important to get the pubs code right for both tenants and pub-owning businesses. Therefore the Government withdrew the regulations yesterday in order to deal with these errors. This means that the pubs code will not be in force by the 26 May as previously set out.

The Government will address the technical drafting issues with the regulations quickly and re-lay amended regulations as soon as possible, minimising the delay bringing the code into force. The regulations are subject to the affirmative procedure, and so Parliament will have an opportunity to debate the content and give the regulations full scrutiny.

[HCWS711]

HEALTH


The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): An informal Health Council meeting was held in Amsterdam on 17-18 April 2016 as part of the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs (EPSCO) Council formation. The Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison) represented the UK.

Innovation

There was a discussion on innovation and pharmaceuticals and topics raised by participants included health technology assessment, pharmaceutical pricing, the joint procurement agreement and different regulatory mechanisms, including priority designation for medicines (PRIME). The UK stressed its support for regulatory work that helped to get effective innovative products to patients sooner. The UK also stated that some joint working on information sharing on pricing and horizon scanning could be useful but underlined that all work must be voluntary and fully respect member state competence.

Healthy foodstuffs

There was a discussion on initiatives member states are taking forward at a national level to encourage healthy eating. The UK said that national action was required on a variety of fronts, including partnership working with industry, and underlined the significant cost of type 2 diabetes and the need to focus on children.

The UK stated that it could not just be for consumers to act, and stressed that consumers would want further information, for example, through mobile apps. The UK also stated the importance of physical activity and explained the recent sugar levy announcement.

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR)

The Dutch presidency raised the issue of AMR as a top priority and stressed that a one-health approach covering human and animal health was vital. The UK underlined the cost of inaction, praised the presidency’s desire for an ambitious outcome at the UN General Assembly, and supported their one-health approach. The UK supported an ambitious agenda on AMR which would lead to concrete progress, provided that member state competence was fully respected. The UK also flagged the importance of the current independent AMR review launched by the Prime Minister.

[HCWS713]

TREASURY

Financial Services Update

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriet Baldwin): I can today confirm that I have laid a Treasury Minute informing the House of the sale of NRAM plc to Cerberus, and the replacement of NRAM plc on the Government’s balance sheet by a new company, NRAM (No.1) Limited (“StayCo”), which will continue to wind down the remaining legacy assets of the former Northern Rock.

The Treasury Minute concerns the transfer to StayCo of assets and liabilities of NRAM plc that were not included in the sale to Cerberus. The Government have also reissued, on a like-for-like basis, the guarantees for StayCo’s directors, replacing the previous arrangements for NRAM plc. StayCo is also taking on NRAM plc’s state aid commitments.

The Government have received the final £520 million from Cerberus as part of the conclusion of this sale. The Treasury’s contingent liabilities have also reduced by £1.6 billion as a result of the withdrawal of the Treasury’s undertaking to NRAM plc.

I will update the House of any further changes to NRAM (No.1) Limited as necessary.

[HCWS712]
The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): I am pleased to announce the publication of updated analysis of the Energy Bill for the purposes of English votes for English laws.

The English votes for English laws process applies to public Bills in the House of Commons. To support the process, the Government have agreed that they will provide information to assist the Speaker in considering whether to certify that Bill or any of its provisions for the purposes of English votes for English laws.

The memorandum provides an assessment of the amendment made at Lords consideration of Commons reason (LCCR) and the motion tabled for Commons consideration of Lords message (CCLM), ahead of CCLM. The Department's assessment is that amendment 7TB does not change the territorial application of the Bill.

The memorandum can be found on the Bill documents page of the Parliament website at: http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2015-16/energy/documents.html and I have deposited a copy in the House of Commons Library.

[HCWS714]
Written Statement

Tuesday 10 May 2016

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Oral Answer to Parliamentary Question: Clarification

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): I made a written statement on 2 March (HCWS569) to correct an answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) during oral questions to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on Thursday, 4 February (Official Report, col.1061). That statement corrected my previous reply so that it referred to an ‘enforcement undertaking’, rather than an ‘enforcement order’.

I wish to clarify that the enforcement undertaking was entered into voluntarily by E & J W Glendinning Ltd and the Environment Agency and was not ordered by the court. The Environment Agency discontinued the prosecution as a result of the enforcement undertaking. The enforcement undertaking does not relate to the “major pollution incident” to which my hon. Friend referred.

[HCWS715]
Written Statements

Wednesday 11 May 2016

HOME DEPARTMENT

Northern Ireland

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): The Security Service, MI5, has increased the threat level to Great Britain from Northern Ireland-related terrorism from moderate to substantial. This means that a terrorist attack is a strong possibility and reflects the continuing threat from dissident republican activity.

As a result of this change, we are working closely with the police and other relevant authorities to ensure appropriate security measures are in place.

The threat level to the UK from international terrorism remains unchanged at severe, which means that an attack is highly likely. The threat level to Northern Ireland from Northern Ireland-related terrorism also remains unchanged at severe.

The public should remain vigilant and report any suspicious activity to the police.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Foreign Affairs Council for Development

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Mr Desmond Swayne): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Baroness Verma) has today made the following statement:

On 12 May, I will attend the Foreign Affairs Council for Development in Brussels. The meeting will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission, Federica Mogherini. The UK is a global leader in delivering world-class international development. I look forward to using this opportunity to work with other member states to push the EU to do more to deliver the ambitious development agenda set out in the global goals.

Revision of the European consensus of development in light of the 2030 agenda

The 2005 European consensus on development—the EU’s overarching development strategy—is geared towards the millennium development goals, and needs updating to reflect the “Global Goals for Sustainable Development” agreed at United Nations General Assembly last year. The EU played a leading role in the global goals negotiations, with strong shaping from the UK, and will be expected to play a key role in implementation. I will argue that the new challenges we face require a comprehensive and integrated EU response; Agenda 2030 must be implemented in the broader context of EU external action (foreign policy and security, trade, environment), with better coherence across development and humanitarian assistance.

Trade, private sector and sustainable development

The Council will note the Council conclusions on responsible global value chains, which the UK supports. The substance of the discussion will focus on a paper from the European External Action Service (EEAS) on how to engage the private sector more in development co-operation. I will highlight the championing role the UK has played on this in recent years.

Afghanistan conference

The Brussels conference on Afghanistan in October 2016 is a key opportunity for the international community to reaffirm its ongoing commitment to Afghanistan’s security and development. It will also be an opportunity for the National Unity Government (NUG) to demonstrate progress and their commitment to economic reform. The Afghan Finance Minister Hakimi will present the new national development strategy to the Council during a lunchtime session.

Joint programming

We support initiatives to improve co-ordination among donors and recognise that joint programming could have a role to play in this. I will continue to offer support to joint programming exercises providing they are worked up and led at the country level and are focused on making a real difference to development outcomes. However, the United Kingdom will not substitute our bilateral strategies for EU-led joint programmes.

Migration and development

To develop a coherent EU-Africa response to increased migration from Africa, the European Commission held the Valletta summit in November 2015. I will push for effective action to ensure that the action plan and EU trust fund agreed at the summit deliver a coherent and effective set of programmes to tackle the migration crisis in Africa. The Council will also discuss a recent communication from the Commission on forced displacement.

Preparation of the world humanitarian summit

The world humanitarian summit takes place from 23-24 May in Istanbul. It is the first global summit on humanitarian issues, and it comes at a time of unprecedented need. I will stress the UK priorities for the world humanitarian summit, including a focus on compliance with international humanitarian law, a new global approach to protracted crises, a global humanitarian system for crisis prevention, and ensuring that humanitarian action delivers for women and girls.
Written Statements

Thursday 12 May 2016

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

EU Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): My noble Friend the Minister of State for Trade and Investment (Lord Price) has today made the following statement.

The EU Foreign Affairs Council (Trade) will take place in Brussels on 13 May 2016. Lord Price will represent the UK.

In relation to WTO Post Nairobi work, the Council will discuss latest developments regarding DDA and new issues, and the EU-strategy towards MC11 on the basis of a paper by the Commission.

The Council will discuss the state of play in the TTIP negotiations and next steps.

The Council will also discuss the trade-related aspects of the recent communication on steel.

On the EU Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) the Council will reflect on the achieved result and discuss the next steps towards signature.

Sustainable finance

On the basis of a presidency paper, Ministers and Central Bank governors discussed ways in which the transition to a sustainable economy could be financed and ways in which transparency could be improved.

Stability and growth pact

Ministers discussed a number of options to make the stability and growth pact simpler and more transparent including whether more work should be done exploring the use of the expenditure benchmark and the medium-term orientation of the fiscal framework.

VAT fraud

In the final session, the Commission and presidency led a discussion in relation to VAT fraud following the publication of the VAT action plan on 7 April. In particular, Finance Ministers looked at steps that could be taken to improve co-operation between member states’ tax, customs and judicial authorities.

[HCWS724]

TREASURY

ECOFIN

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): An informal meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council was held in Amsterdam on 22-23 April 2016. EU Finance Ministers discussed the following items:

EU budget

Following an introduction from Commission Vice-President Kristalina Georgieva, Ministers discussed challenges for the EU budget, caused by unforeseen events.

Strengthening the banking union

Views were exchanged between Ministers and Central Bank governors on the regulatory treatment of banks’ sovereign debt on the basis of a presidency note and a draft report from the high-level working group.

Panama Papers

The European Commission gave a policy reaction outlining measures being taken to tackle tax avoidance. The UK, along with France, Germany, Italy and Spain, launched an initiative on the automatic exchange of beneficial ownership information in April and wrote a G5 letter to EU member states asking them to join the initiative. As a result of UK leadership all EU Finance Ministers have now agreed to enter into the project which will see tax authorities and law enforcement agencies automatically share information on who really owns and controls companies.

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[HCWS722]

Office of Financial Sanctions Implementations

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): At the summer Budget the Chancellor announced that HM Treasury will establish the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI) before the end of the financial year to support the UK’s foreign policy and national security goals and help maintain the integrity of and confidence in the UK financial services sector. The OFSI was established on 31 March 2016 within HM Treasury. Its principle aims are to:

- increase awareness of and compliance with financial sanctions;
- ensure that sanctions breaches are rapidly detected and effectively addressed; and
- provide a professional service to the public and industry on financial sanctions issues.

The Treasury, through OFSI, will continue to be the UK’s competent authority for the implementation of financial sanctions, and Treasury ministers will continue to be responsible for licencing decisions and designations under UK sanctions legislation.

[HCWS723]

DEFENCE

Commonwealth Recruitment

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Penny Mordaunt): There is a long tradition of Commonwealth citizens serving in the British armed forces, and we continue to value their service which provides an important contribution in defending the UK at home and abroad.

The current Commonwealth recruitment rules which require five years’ UK residency have therefore been reviewed, and the residency requirements will be waived to allow for 200 Commonwealth citizens per annum to be recruited to fill a limited number of roles in the regular armed forces which require specialist skills. The numbers of individuals that can be recruited and the list of roles that can be filled under these arrangements have been agreed in consultation with the Home Office. These will be subject to regular review.
The requirement for individuals to have indefinite leave to remain (ILR) to join the reserves has not been changed. However, if an individual with specialist skills already residing in the UK is identified, applications for exceptional circumstances can be cleared on an individual basis with the Home Office.

This will not affect personnel from the Republic of Ireland, Malta, the Republic of Cyprus, or those in the Brigade of Gurkhas. This will also not affect Gurkha or Commonwealth serving personnel with more than four years’ regular service applying to join the reserves provided they are granted ILR on discharge.

This policy will be kept under review.  

Art Collection

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): Ownership of the most significant works within the Ministry of Defence art collection (MODAC) is to be transferred to other public institutions in order to ensure their continued protection and public display.

The MODAC currently comprises more than 2,000 individual items. It includes some fine art and a notable collection of chronometers but also includes numerous lower value items. Key items of public interest are located in public galleries and museums, with the remainder in MOD premises and other Government or public buildings.

Ownership of works with intrinsic artistic or heritage value is to be transferred to other public bodies, including the National Maritime Museum, the National Museum of the Royal Navy, the Army Museum, the Imperial War Museum and the Government Art Collection. Residual items will remain within MOD custody.

MODAC items are accounted for as publicly owned non-operational heritage assets and the collection has therefore not been valued formally, in line with Government policy. Transfer on an unvalued basis has been approved by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): My right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Baroness Anelay of St Johns), has made the following written statement:

In September 2013, the UK became the first country to implement the UN guiding principles on business and human rights through the publication of a national action plan “Good Business”, which was presented by the then Foreign and Business Secretaries. At that time, the coalition Government committed to producing an update.

This update reflects developments, including at the international level, since our plan was first published. It also summarises the many activities and initiatives that have been taken forward by UK business and civil society.

The updated NAP reflects the range of action related to business and human rights that takes place across Government. It brings together in one place Government action and private sector initiatives, as well as setting out the access to remedy, both judicial and non-judicial, which exists within the UK. By publishing this update, the UK demonstrates its continued commitment to business and human rights and to the implementation of the universally agreed UN guiding principles, which we consider the best method for promoting good business practice and protecting potential victims from human rights abuses.

This update was produced following consultation with a broad range of stakeholders from business and civil society. While jointly owned by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, this update was contributed to by a number of Government Departments.

HOME DEPARTMENT

National Crime Agency Remuneration Body

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): The report of the National Crime Agency (NCA) Remuneration Review Body for 2016 has been published today. In line with my letter setting the body’s remit, it has made recommendations on pay and allowances for NCA officers designated with operational powers. I wish to express my thanks to the Chairman and members of the review body for their careful consideration of the evidence.

The review body received evidence from the NCA, the Home Office, Her Majesty’s Treasury and the relevant trade unions and has recommended an across-the-board increase of 1% for NCA officers and a 1% increase in London weighting. I accept their recommendations in full.

The report also sets the agenda for further reform of the NCA’s pay structure and we will continue to support the NCA to develop the workforce needed to tackle serious and organised crime in the 21st century.

Copies of the NCA Remuneration Review Body’s report are available in the Parliamentary Vote Office and at www.gov.uk.

UK Anti-corruption Plan

The Minister for Security (Mr John Hayes): Today my right hon. Friend the Government Anti-corruption Champion (Sir Eric Pickles) and I wish to inform the House that the Government are publishing a progress update on the UK’s first cross-Government anti-corruption plan, on the same day that the Prime Minister is hosting a global anti-corruption summit in London—to galvanise international action against corruption.

On 18 December 2014, we published the UK anti-corruption plan, which set out, for the first time, all of the UK’s anti-corruption efforts under one cross-departmental plan, including how we are tackling the
threat of corruption and taking action to reduce corruption risks across a range of sectors, both in the UK and overseas.

In the UK anti-corruption plan, we committed to publishing a progress update on the actions, ensuring that this was a living document which evolved alongside the nature of the threat from corruption and our response. The inter-ministerial group on anti-corruption, which we co-chair, has been overseeing delivery of the commitments and we have been working with colleagues across Government and civil society to drive forward this agenda.

The progress update highlights the UK’s performance in delivering its anti-corruption commitments—62 out of the 66 actions (94%) are complete or on track to be delivered—and sets out the positive progress that has been made: to build a better picture of how corruption is affecting our society and economy; to strengthen our legal and operational tools and activity; to enhance our law enforcement response; to deny use of our financial system for those who are trying to abuse it; and to step up our efforts internationally.

While there is still more to be done, the positive developments outlined in the progress update, coupled with the international leadership being shown by the UK through the global anti-corruption summit, demonstrates the UK’s commitment to rooting out corruption in all its forms. Moreover, the new cross-agency taskforce to respond to any wrong-doing resulting from the “Mossack Fonseca” papers, sends a strong message that tackling corruption is a key priority for the UK and that we take decisive action wherever criminal activity arises.

A copy of the plan will be placed in the Library of the House and also made available on the Government website at: www.gov.uk.

[HCWS729]

JUSTICE

Youth Justice

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Michael Gove): Following the troubling allegations raised by whistleblowers—and documented by the BBC’s “Panorama”—about the treatment of young people in custody at Medway, I appointed an independent improvement board to investigate the centre’s governance and the safeguarding measures in place there.

I am today publishing the board’s report, which tells a powerful story—not just about what went wrong at Medway, but about broader problems in the youth justice system, and specifically in the children’s secure estate. The board’s conclusions reinforce the interim findings from the separate, wider review that I have asked Charlie Taylor to prepare on the youth justice system, which will report this summer.

Given the findings of the independent improvement board, the pending Charlie Taylor review and the announcement by G4S in February 2016 of its intention to sell its children’s services business I have agreed with G4S that the new contract to operate Medway will not proceed.

The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) will take over the running of Medway in the short term—by the end of July—and will work closely with the Youth Justice Board on the enhanced monitoring arrangements that will be put in place. Beverley Bevan—an experienced prison governor with seven years’ experience of working with young offenders—will be appointed as the governor at that time.

The independent improvement board made a series of recommendations which we accept in full and which will be implemented across all three secure training centres (STCs). By implementing these recommendations, we will strengthen external scrutiny, safeguarding and monitoring arrangements and clarify the responsibilities of organisations and individuals involved in providing services at all STCs. Steps will be taken to ensure that whistleblowers—including young people who speak out—are supported and listened to.

However, the fundamental problem identified by the independent improvement board was that those running Medway conceived of it as a place of coercion, where the culture and the incentives—as they were designed in the contracts—were centred around the corralling and control of children, rather than their full rehabilitation. Their focus should instead have been on education and care, on identifying root problems and giving children the opportunity to find their way back into society, and to make something of themselves.

Charlie Taylor’s interim findings have made it clear that the places where young offenders spend time should not be junior prisons, but secure schools. I am announcing today that each of the secure training centres will have a new governing body who will scrutinise and support those running each centre. This will be a first step towards giving these centres the type of oversight and support that we would see in an ordinary school.

When Charlie’s final report is published, I hope we will be able to move swiftly to a model which ensures that the educational mission of these establishments is central to their existence.

Based on the findings of the independent improvement board, I will appoint a similar youth custody improvement board to work across the youth secure estate, to help to make sure that children are safe and to improve standards of behaviour management in each secure training centre and young offender institution that holds children, including those currently run by NOMS. I will confirm the board appointments in due course.

I am grateful to all the members of the independent improvement board who delivered their important work at such impressive speed.

This report, and our response to the recommendations made by the independent improvement board can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/medway-improvement-board-report-and-moj-response-to-its-recommendations.

I will place a copy of these in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS725]
LEADER OF THE HOUSE

Legislation: 2015-16 Session

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling):

Following the conclusion of business in the House today, I expect Parliament to be prorogued prior to the State Opening of the next session on 18 May. Subject to proceedings, 23 Government Bills will have received Royal Assent in the 2015-2016 session:

- Armed Forces Bill
- Bank of England and Financial Services Bill
- Charities (Protection and Social Investment) Bill
- Childcare Bill
- Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill
- Education and Adoption Bill
- Energy Bill
- Enterprise Bill
- European Union (Approvals) Bill
- European Union (Finance) Bill
- European Union Referendum Bill
- Finance Bill
- Housing and Planning Bill
- Immigration Bill
- National Insurance Contributions (Rate Ceilings) Bill
- Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill
- Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Bill
- Psychoactive Substances Bill
- Scotland Bill
- Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill
- Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Bill
- Trade Union Bill
- Welfare Reform and Work Bill

The following Private Members’ Bills will have received Royal Assent in the 2015-16 session:

- Access to Medical Treatments (Innovation) Bill
- Criminal Cases Review Commission (Information) Bill
- Driving Instructors (Registration) Bill
- House of Commons (Members’ Fund) (No.2) Bill
- NHS (Charitable Trusts Etc) Bill
- Riot Compensation Bill

The following Bills will carry over to the next session:

- Finance (No.2) Bill
- High Speed Rail (London-West Midlands) Bill

[NHWS727]

NORTHERN IRELAND

National Security Arrangements: Carlile Report

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): This is a summary of the main findings from the report by Lord Carlile, the Independent Reviewer of National Security arrangements in Northern Ireland, covering the period from 1 January 2015 to 31 January 2016. Lord Carlile concludes:

“Throughout the year I have been briefed extensively on the state of threat in Northern Ireland. The context in which national security activities are performed in Northern Ireland remains challenging. As in the previous year there have been successes against dissident republicans (DRs), with a number of high profile trials pending. Police and security pressure has resulted in significant attrition but attacks still occur. Co-operation with the Irish authorities is good. This has quickened the pace of activity against DRs.

I regard 2015 as a year of continuing success in thwarting and detecting terrorism; while there is no sign of reduced ambition in the minds of terrorists, the ability of these terrorists to carry out attacks has suppressed over the years by successful attrition and arrests. This is undoubtedly the result of excellent joint activity by M15 and PSNI. Given that the total exclusion of paramilitary activity is unlikely to be achieved in the measurable future, M15, the PSNI and others involved have maintained good progress.

In preparing this report I have considered the current threat level, and what I have learned of events of a terrorist nature during the year. There were 16 national security attacks during 2015, with no serious injuries. Dissident republican groupings are resilient and capable; a number of attacks in 2015 were unsuccessful by narrow margins. Current and released prisoners continue to present a challenge. I was reminded of the diverse and enduring nature of the threat.

Dissident republicans remain interested in and involved in criminality, organised crime and money laundering. They also retain a political purpose, some with more determination than others.

Loyalist paramilitaries also have political imperatives, though the motivation of many is the making of money through extortion and other organised crime.

During 2015 I have met a range of stakeholders. I have engaged with PSNI and M15 and examined the relationship between them and the Police Ombudsman of Northern Ireland (PONI) and the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB). I also met some of the NI political parties. I am grateful to NIO Ministers for their close interest in the matters discussed here. Meetings with Ministers have occurred. Ministers are always well briefed and exceptionally well informed on all material issues.

During 2015 I met with the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB), and also Alyson Kilpatrick, the Independent Human Rights Advisor to the NIPB. The NIPB can feel assured that the Human Rights Advisor is well able to discharge her duties in respect of national security.

I met the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Executive’s Minister of Justice, David Ford MLA. Both have been extremely frank and helpful. I do not underestimate the formidable nature of the Ombudsman’s job, especially in relation to older cases. Furthermore, I would like to express my admiration and thanks to David Ford. He has played a significant part in the noromalisation of the justice system and the rule of law in NI.

I am satisfied that the periodic briefings provided to me have been full and not selective, and that I have a good understanding of relevant matters. Interlocutors across the security piece, including vocal opponents and critics, have been willing to brief me.

I held a detailed meeting with the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ). They provided me with a robustly critical narrative of the current security situation. I found their views helpful, though more anxious than the true security situation justifies in my opinion. The CAJ expressed the view that deprivation caused by austerity is leading to recruitment into paramilitary groups. These views found resonance with some interlocutors.

This year once again I have reviewed the arrangements for Covert Human Intelligence Sources (CHIS). Overall the use of CHIS is effective. CHIS operations are run with a clear investigative strategy. Participation of CHIS in crime is subject to strict control and protocols. There are frequent meetings between PSNI and M15 at a senior level to discuss CHIS policy and operations, and in accordance with the
St. Andrews principles, PSNI manage the majority of national security CHIS. There is a systematic review procedure for CHIS.

Across all my conversations in the past year I have found confusion and concern about how historic issues are to be dealt with and addressed. Much optimism is being placed in the proposed Historical Investigations Unit (HIU). I am sure the Secretary of State and NI Executive Ministers will ensure proportionate funding, and the level of documentary and other evidential disclosure necessary for the fulfilment of its proper objectives.

I have considered a number of issues in relation to terrorism prosecutions. I continue to have concerns about the length of sentences in NI for terrorism related offences, and that delays in cases coming to trial are resulting in defendants being released on bail. I acknowledge the reform of committal proceedings contained in the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. I discussed more active case management and plea bargaining as means to save court time.

Despite the active and concerned involvement of senior judges throughout the criminal justice system there remain concerns about the disclosure system in which public interest immunity and related disclosure issues are not dealt with by the trial judge, as they are in GB.

I remain of the view that the residual serious and lethal threat of terrorism justifies the continuation of the non-jury trial arrangements provided under the Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007.

I have enquired again about the use of intercept evidence. I remain satisfied that there is solid scrutiny and review of interception, in an environment in which communications technology is developing quickly.

Continued vigilance and the maintenance of counter-terrorism resourcing are essential. However, once again I have drawn comfort from the successful joint operations between MI5 and the PSNI, and their high level of co-operation with their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland. Normality is a genuine and mostly realisable ambition, rather than merely an aspiration.

Attrition caused by arrests and charges both in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has been good in 2015; but a number of challenges in combating the threat remain.

I have measured performance in 2015 against the five key principles identified in relation to national security in Annex E to the St Andrews agreement of October 2006. My conclusions in relation to Annex E are set out in the attached Table.7

Further to reinforce this comprehensive set of safeguards, the Government confirm that they accept and will ensure that effect is given to the five key principles which the Chief Constable has identified as crucial to the effective operation of the new arrangements, viz:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text of Annex E</th>
<th>Conclusions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Security Service relating to terrorism in Northern Ireland will be visible to the PSNI.</td>
<td>There is no compliance. Arrangements are in place to deal with any suspected malfeasance by a PSNI or MI5 officer. There is no compliance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSNI will be informed of all Security Service counter-terrorism investigations and operations relating to Northern Ireland.</td>
<td>There is compliance. Dissemination policy has developed since the new arrangements came into force.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security Service intelligence will be disseminated within PSNI according to the current PSNI dissemination policy, and using police procedures</td>
<td></td>
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**TRANSPORT**

Motoring Services Strategy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon) has made the following written statement:

The Department for Transport’s three motoring services agencies (the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA); the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) and the Vehicle Certification Agency (VCA)) are key to ensuring the United Kingdom’s road network plays its part in promoting the future prosperity of our nation. I am today publishing a strategy for the agencies, which sets out the direction they will take over the remainder of this Parliament.

The strategy sets out our vision for the agencies’ future: how we can better support those learning to drive to ensure they are properly prepared to take their practical test, what we can do to ensure haulage and bus and coach operators can access all our services efficiently and flexibly to suit their needs, and how we can best support the UK automotive industry.

The agencies’ services, making sure drivers are properly trained and licensed and the vehicles they use are safe and meet environmental standards, touches nearly all aspects of our society. Most people, at some time, will be affected by the agencies’ work—whether they are choosing an instructor as they begin to learn to drive, sitting on a bus, buying a new motorcycle, choosing a wheelchair accessible vehicle or moving house—the motoring services agencies will be involved at some stage. We need to ensure that the services the agencies deliver are fit for motoring today and are responsive to new developments in technology in order for them to continue to meet our needs in the future.

Recognising this country’s enviable road safety record, and the importance of the highway network to the economy, we reiterate the need for driver training that prepares people for a lifetime of safe road use. We will examine the potential benefits of different models for delivery of the practical driving test. We will strengthen the agencies’ relationships with commercial users of their services, whose needs can be very different from those of individual members of the public. We will examine how various transport industry sectors can be given greater responsibility in operating or testing vehicles. The agencies are almost entirely funded by user fees; so we will take a more methodical approach to reviewing those fees, to ensure that they are transparent and closely aligned to the costs of the services they cover.
A copy of the strategy will be placed in the House Library and will also be available on www.gov.uk.
Attachments can be viewed online at: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/motoring-services-strategy-a-strategic-direction-2016-to-2020.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Informal Council

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Stephen Crabb): The informal Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council met on 19-20 April in Amsterdam. Emily Shirtcliff, deputy director in the BIS labour market directorate, represented the United Kingdom.

The first day involved a plenary session on labour mobility. The focus of most member state interventions was on the revision of the posting of workers directive. The United Kingdom intervened to make clear that it did not yet have a formal position and was looking carefully at the Commission’s proposal.

The second day started with workshops on the European Commission’s consultation on its proposed pillar of social rights and concluded with a plenary session on the platform for undeclared work. At the workshop the United Kingdom welcomed the clarity that the pillar of social rights was for the euro area, but also for other countries to join if they wanted to.

On the platform for undeclared work the United Kingdom welcomed the progress made so far and looked forward to the platform’s first meeting.
The petition requests the assistance of the FCO in

the review and its recommendations are available. This work will proceed as soon as the report of

the review and its recommendations as soon as they

improvements. The Minister has asked to see the report

of the review and its recommendations as soon as they

are available.

To address these issues, the Minister recently met

with the family of one of these children, Matthew

Garnett to hear of their experiences about where they

think the system could be improved to support children

and young people who have complex needs to get the

right mental health care.

Since this meeting, the Minister has asked NHS

England, which is responsible for commissioning in-patient
care for children and young people with mental health
needs, to carry out a review of Matthew Garnett’s case.

Michael Marsh, the Medical Director of Specialised
Commissioning for NHS London, chaired the review.
The review is now preparing recommendations for local
improvements. The Minister has asked to see the report
of the review and its recommendations as soon as they
are available.

The Minister has also asked Department of Health
officials to work with an independent expert to see if
there are more general systemic issues to be addressed
as the Government implement the transformation
programme to improve children and young people’s
mental health, as set out in the Government’s report Future
in Mind. This work will proceed as soon as the report of
the review and its recommendations are available.
Matthew Garnett has now been transferred to St. Andrew’s Hospital in Northampton, which is able to provide the care he needs.

**TREASURY**

**Tobacco levy**

*The petition of residents of the UK.*

Declares that cuts to public health funding mean vital Stop Smoking Services are being closed down; further that these closures are preventing smokers accessing the most effective way to make them quit; and further that an online petition and an additional paper petition on this matter have received 16,112 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges HM Treasury to make the tobacco industry pay for the damage they cause by introducing a tobacco levy to help fund Stop Smoking Services and advertising campaigns to help people quit.

And the petitioners remain, etc. —[Presented by Kevin Barron, Official Report, 8 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 246.]

**Observations from the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Damian Hinds):**

The Government thank the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) for his petition on introducing a levy on the tobacco industry to fund smoking cessation services. We also thank all the members of the public who have signed the petition.

As the single largest cause of preventable illness and premature death in the UK, smoking remains one of the country’s most significant public health challenges. The Government laid out their position on introducing a levy on the tobacco industry in the consultation response published last September. The Government do not believe a levy is an effective way to raise revenue or protect public health, particularly when we have already committed to maintaining the tobacco duty escalator until the end of the Parliament.

Local Authorities will receive over £16 billion to spend on public health—including stop smoking services—over the next five years. This is in addition to what NHS England will continue to spend on vaccinations, screening and other preventive interventions.

The Government remain committed to working towards their two fiscal goals on tobacco of raising revenue and protecting public health and will continue to make targeted interventions through the tax system. At Budget 2016 we announced an additional 3% rise on hand-rolling tobacco duty and that the Government would introduce a minimum excise tax for cigarettes, with legislation in Finance Bill 2017. The Department of Health will publish a new tobacco control plan later this year, which will ensure the Government’s wider strategy for tackling the harms caused by tobacco continues to strengthen and evolve.
Petitions

Monday 9 May 2016

PRESENTED PETITION
Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Community pharmacies

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that local pharmacies are a vital frontline health service, forming part of the fabric of health communities across England; further that they may be forced to close as a result of Government proposals; further that this could deprive people of accessible medicines advice and other valuable support from trusted professionals; and further that it may also put more pressure on GPs and hospital services.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department of Health to reassess their proposed plans and protect local pharmacies.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tom Brake.]

[1P001694]

OBSERVATIONS

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Improved mobile telephone signal in South Suffolk

The petition of residents of South Suffolk,

Declares that too many communities in the constituency suffer from poor mobile phone signal and not-spots; further that the Department of Culture, Media and Sport together with Her Majesty’s Treasury should bring forward a new round of Mobile Infrastructure Project funding to support new masts in the worst affected villages; and further that a local paper petition and online petition on this matter has received 3,707 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department of Health to reassess their proposed plans and protect local pharmacies.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by James Cartlidge, Official Report, 9 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 387.]

[1P001677]

Observations from The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale):
The Mobile Infrastructure Project (MIP) was a complex and challenging programme which aimed to address the small number of the population without 2G coverage by supporting the build of mobile masts. Most mast sites will be able to provide 3G and 4G coverage once operational.

As you are aware, MIP and its associated funding was contracted to end on 31 March 2016, with there being no plans to extend the project beyond this date. I understand the disappointment of those communities that will not benefit from MIP intervention; I am acutely aware that in many of these communities there was strong support for the MIP programme.

There were four potential MIP mast sites identified in South Suffolk to tackle not-spot areas. One of these masts, in Bildeston, was built and is providing mobile coverage. Two identified mast sites—one near Assington Green and another near Hartest—could not be progressed due to withdrawal of interest by landowners. In both instances, withdrawal was due to concerns about the visual impact the mast structure would have on the landscape. Due to the timing of these withdrawals, alternative locations could not be considered.

I understand that for the final mast, a planning application was made following a successful pre application process. Unfortunately, the site provider became unwilling to proceed with the hosting of a mast site following strong opposition from neighbouring residents.

Despite the closure of the MIP programme, I would like to assure you that improving mobile coverage across the UK remains a top priority for Government. In December 2014, the Government reached a landmark agreement with the four UK MNOs to ensure that 90% of the UK’s land mass will have voice and text coverage from each of them by 2017. It also means that 97.7% of the UK will have a signal from at least one mobile operator.

This is a significant change in the way MNOs relate to coverage in this country and will guarantee £5 billion of investment in mobile infrastructure. Mobile services will be provided to some areas for the first time, and will be improved across the UK. It is estimated that as a result of this deal, partial not-spots (areas where there is coverage from one or two operators but not all four) will be halved and complete not-spots will be reduced by two-thirds.

To support industry mobile coverage rollout further, the Government announced on 17 March 2016 proposals to reform planning laws (for England only) that will, amongst other things, make it easier to build taller masts so that coverage can be improved further. We will continue to work with industry to support investment and help deliver improved digital connectivity in the UK.

Additionally, Telefonica (O2) has a further licence obligation to deliver indoor 4G coverage to 98% of premises in the UK (and 95% of premises in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) by 2017. Other MNOs have indicated that they will also match this commitment. These licence obligations should bring improved coverage across the UK.
Petition

Tuesday 10 May 2016

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Post office closures in Long Lawford and Bulkington

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the post office facilities in Long Lawford and Bulkington, run by the Post Office and the Co-operative Society, should not be closed; further that the closures would result in redundancies of current post office staff; and further that local petitions on this matter have been signed by 1551 individuals.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage the Post Office and the Co-operative Society to reconsider the planned closure of post offices in Long Lawford and Bulkington.

And the petitioners remain, etc—[Presented by Mark Pawsey, Official Report, 13 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 473].

[P001683]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Life Sciences (George Freeman):

The Government understand the importance of Post Office services to local communities and the concerns over any disruption to those services.

The Post Office operates as an independent business and the Government do not interfere in day to day operational responsibilities of the company, which includes decisions on the provision and location of individual post offices.

The Post Office recognises how important its services are to local communities and is committed to maintaining these services wherever possible. Unplanned closures can occur as a result of a situation beyond the control of the Post Office and where this happens, the Post Office works quickly to try to restore services to the community, where possible.

The Post Office has advised the Government that both of these branches are in a temporary closure position resulting from the resignation of their previous postmasters and the withdrawal of the premises for use. The Post Office is currently in the process of carrying out a local public consultation on reopening Bulkington post office at alternative premises nearby. The Government understand that, while no solution has yet been found for Long Lawford, the Post Office’s field teams continue to work hard with the local community to identify alternative provision.
Petition

Wednesday 11 May 2016

OBSERVATIONS

TREASURY

Tax Credits

The petition of residents of the Wakefield constituency,
Declares that the petitioners are strongly opposed to
the Government’s proposed cuts to tax credits which
will cost working families up to £1,300 a year.
The petitioners therefore request that the House of
Commons reconsiders the proposals and stop the tax
credit cuts.
And the petitioners remain, etc.

Observations from the Exchequer Secretary to the
Treasury (Damian Hinds):

The Government thank the residents of Wakefield
constituency for their petition on proposals to cut tax
credits as announced at Budget 2015. The Government
are sorry to hear about their concerns about these changes.
The Government are committed to moving Britain
from a low wage, high tax, high welfare economy to a
higher wage, lower tax and lower welfare society.

As the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in
Spending Review and Autumn Statement 2015, the
Government have listened to concerns about the proposed
changes to the tax credit taper rate and the income
threshold and confirmed those changes will not go
ahead.

The Government remain committed to putting welfare
spending on a more sustainable path to make the system
fair for those who pay for it as well as those who benefit
from it, and to ensure it always pays more to be in work,
as announced in the Summer Budget and reiterated in
the Autumn Statement. We have therefore continued
with other measures such as the tax credits income rise
disregard, the amount by which a tax credit claimant’s
income can increase within the year before their tax
credit award is adjusted, reducing it from £5,000 to
£2,500. This makes the tax credit system fairer so claimants
on similar incomes will receive similar awards.

The Government continue to help working families
keep more of what they earn. The new National Living
Wage has been introduced at £7.20 for workers aged 25
and older—a cash increase of £900 for a full time
worker on the current National Minimum Wage. The
Personal Allowance was increased again in April to
£11,000, meaning the average taxpayer now pays £905
less income tax then in 2010. Fuel duty has been frozen
again for the sixth year in a row. And the Personal
Savings Allowance has been introduced so the majority
of people will now pay no tax at all on their savings
income.
**Petitions**

*Thursday 12 May 2016*

**OBSERVATIONS**

**EDUCATION**

**School Funding Model**

*The petition of residents of Beverley and Holderness,*

 Declares that the petitioners believe the existing school funding model in England is arbitrary and unfair; further declares that the ten best funded areas of England have on average received grants of £6,300 per pupil this year, compared to an average of £4,200 per pupil in the ten most poorly funded areas of England; and further declares that the petitioners welcome the Government’s commitment to introduce fairer school funding.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons supports the earliest possible introduction of a new National Funding Formula for schools in England.

And the petitioners remain, etc. —*Presented by Graham Stuart, Official Report, 1 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 303.*

**Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Mr Sam Gyimah):**

The Chancellor confirmed at the spending review our intention to introduce national funding formulae for schools, high needs and early years, so that funding is transparently and fairly matched to need. At the budget in March he pledged £500 million to speed up transition to the national funding formula, this will help get extra funding quicker to those schools that need it most.

We are currently developing our plans for the national funding formula and the first phase of a two-stage consultation concluded on 17 April.

Once we have had the opportunity to consider all the responses from our first consultation we will proceed to the second stage. This will address the details of the formula and set out the anticipated impacts on the reforms on individual schools. We would encourage you all to take the opportunity to contribute your views on our proposals.

The results of the consultation and the Department’s response will be published on www.gov.uk later this year.

**TREASURY**

**Homelessness in Corby**

*The petition of residents of the UK,*

 Declares that there were 35 homeless men and women living on the streets of Corby during the winter of 2014-2015; further that they are without a home through no fault of their own; further that the work of local charities, churches and other organisations does not suffice to ease their situation; and further that an online petition on this matter was signed by 677 individuals.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to put pressure on Corby Borough Council to provide adequate housing for Corby’s homeless people.

And the petitioners remain, etc. —[P001681]

**Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones):**

Nobody should ever have to sleep rough, and the Government remain absolutely committed to preventing and reducing homelessness.

We have increased funding for central programmes to prevent and reduce homelessness to £139 million over the next four years. This will include a new national £10 million programme to support and scale up innovative ways to tackle rough sleeping, and a new £10 million Social Impact Bond fund to help the most entrenched rough sleepers move off the streets. These programmes will build on the success of our No Second Night Out initiative and London’s existing Social Impact Bond. As well as this, we will also be launching an additional £100 million programme for low-cost move on accommodation, including for rough sleepers leaving hostels.

Local authorities, in partnership with frontline organisations, play a vital role in preventing and reducing homelessness. In protecting homelessness prevention funding for local authorities, totalling £315 million by 2019-20, we expect them to provide quality advice and assistance to those that approach them for help. Since 2010, this investment has helped local authorities prevent or relieve over 1 million households from becoming homeless. The Government are also considering options, including legislation, to prevent even more people from facing a homelessness crisis in the first place. In doing so, we are looking to learn from other countries who have innovated in the way they deal with homelessness.
Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 3 May 2016

DEFENCE

Shipbuilding on the Clyde

The following is an extract from the response to the Urgent Question on Shipbuilding on the Clyde on Monday 25 April 2016.

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Mr Philip Dunne): More broadly for Scotland, our commitment to the successor programme will sustain 6,800 military and civilian jobs there, rising to 8,200 by 2022. As the programme progresses, an additional 270 personnel will be based at Her Majesty’s naval base Clyde. Extending the Typhoon until at least 2040, and upgrading it with the active electronically scanned array radar, will benefit RAF Lossiemouth and continue to benefit Selex ES in Edinburgh. Our new maritime patrol aircraft will be based at RAF Lossiemouth, which is ideally placed for the most common maritime patrol areas and is currently used as a maritime patrol aircraft operating base by our NATO allies. This will also lead to significant investment, and our current estimate is for some 200 extra jobs in Scotland.—[Official Report, 25 April 2016, Vol. 608, c. 1139.]

Letter of correction from Philip Dunne.

An error has been identified at the end of my response. The correct response should have been:

Mr Dunne: More broadly for Scotland, our commitment to the successor programme will sustain 6,800 military and civilian jobs there, rising to 8,200 by 2022. As the programme progresses, an additional 270 personnel will be based at Her Majesty’s naval base Clyde. Extending the Typhoon until at least 2040, and upgrading it with the active electronically scanned array radar, will benefit RAF Lossiemouth and continue to benefit Selex ES in Edinburgh. Our new maritime patrol aircraft will be based at RAF Lossiemouth, which is ideally placed for the most common maritime patrol areas and is currently used as a maritime patrol aircraft operating base by our NATO allies. This will also lead to significant investment, and our current estimate is for some 400 extra jobs in Scotland.
Ministerial Correction

Thursday 12 May 2016

CABINET OFFICE

Electoral Fraud: Tower Hamlets

The following is an extract from the Adjournment debate on 18 April 2016.

John Penrose: I hope the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I cannot comment on specific details of ongoing investigations. As an experienced parliamentarian and former Minister, he will understand the constraints of what I can and cannot say. He is, however, doing entirely the right thing. He mentioned that he was about to have discussions and meetings with Commissioner Hogan-Howe and perhaps others. I hope that they can provide him with further reassurances about what is going on with the investigations. I understand that there are still investigations into grant fraud, for example, in parallel with the ongoing investigations into electoral fraud. They perhaps cannot be made public, but he might be able to get further reassurances.


Letter of correction from John Penrose:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick).

The correct response should have been:

John Penrose: I hope the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I cannot comment on specific details of ongoing investigations. As an experienced parliamentarian and former Minister, he will understand the constraints of what I can and cannot say. He is, however, doing entirely the right thing. He mentioned that he was about to have discussions and meetings with Commissioner Hogan-Howe and perhaps others. I hope that they can provide him with further reassurances about what is going on with the investigations. I understand that there are still investigations into grant fraud, for example, in parallel with the closed investigations into electoral fraud. They perhaps cannot be made public, but he might be able to get further reassurances.